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IN THE DEAD OF NIGHT.

A Novel.

IN THREE VOLUMES.
VOL. II.



LONDON:
RICHARD BENTLEY AND SON.

1874.

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IN THE DEAD OF NIGHT.

CHAPTER I.

THE EVE OF THE TRIAL.

ITHIN a week of Tom Bristow's first visit to Pincote, and his introduction to the Copes, father and son, Mr. Cope, junior, found himself, much to his disgust, fairly on his way to New York. He would gladly have rebelled against the parental dictum in this matter, if he had dared to do so ; but he knew of old how worse than useless it would be for him to offer the slightest opposition to his father's wishes.

"You will go and say good-bye to Miss Culpepper as a matter of course," said Mr.

Cope to him. "But don't grow too sentimental over the parting. Do it in an easy, smiling way, as if you were merely going out of town for a few days. Don't make any promises—don't talk about the future—and, above all, don't say a word about marriage. Of course, you will have to write to her occasionally while you are away. Just a few lines, you know, to say how you are, and all that. No mawkish silly love-nonsense, but a sensible, manly letter; and be wisely reticent as to the date of your return. Very sorry, but you don't know how much longer your business may detain you—you know the sort of thing I mean."

When the idea had first entered Mr. Cope's mind that it would be an excellent thing if he could only succeed in getting his son engaged to Squire Culpepper's only child, it had not been without an ulterior eye to the fortune which that young lady would one day call her own that he had been induced to press forward the scheme to a successful issue. By marrying Miss Culpepper, his son would

be enabled to take up a position in county society such as he could never hope to attain either by his own merits, which were of the most moderate kind, or from his father's money bags alone. But dearly as Mr. Cope loved position, he loved money still better ; and it was no part of his programme that his son should marry a pauper, even though that pauper could trace back her pedigree to the Conqueror. And yet, if the squire went on speculating as madly as he was evidently doing now, it seemed only too probable that pauperism, or something very much like it, would be the result, as far as Miss Culpepper was concerned. Instead of having a fortune of at least twenty thousand pounds, as she ought to have, would she come in for as many pence when the old man died ? Mr. Cope groaned in spirit as he asked himself the question, and he became more determined than ever to carry out his policy of waiting and watching, before allowing the engagement of the young people to reach a point that would render a subsequent rupture impossible without open

scandal—and scandal was a bugbear of which the banker stood in extreme dread.

Fortunately, perhaps, for Mr. Cope's view, the feelings of neither of the people chiefly concerned were very deeply interested. Edward had obeyed his father in this as in everything else. He had known Jane from a child, and he liked her because she was clever and good-tempered. But she by no means realized his ideal of feminine beauty. She was too slender, too slightly formed to meet with his approval. "There's not enough of her," was the way he put it to himself. Miss Moggs, the confectioner's daughter, with her ample proportions and beaming smile, was far more to his taste. Equally to his taste was the pastry dispensed by Miss Moggs's plump fingers, of which he used to devour enormous quantities, seated on a three-legged stool in front of the counter, while chatting in a free and easy way about his horses and dogs, and the number of pigeons he had slaughtered of late. And then it was so much easier to talk to Miss Moggs than it was to talk to Jane. Miss

Moggs looked up to him as to a young magnificent, and listened to his oracular utterances with becoming reverence and attention ; but Jane, somehow, didn't seem to appreciate him as he wished to be appreciated, and he never felt quite sure that she was not laughing at him in her sleeve.

" So you are going to leave us by the eight o'clock train to-morrow, are you?" asked Jane, when he went to Pincote to say a few last words of farewell. He had sat down by her side on the sofa, and had taken her unresisting hand in his ; a somewhat thin, cold little hand, that returned his pressure very faintly. How different, as he could not help saying to himself, from the warm, plump fingers of Matilda Moggs.

" Yes, I'm going by the morning train. Perhaps I shall never come back. Perhaps I shall be drowned," he said, somewhat dolorously.

" Not you, Edward, dear. You will live to plague us all for many a year to come. I wish I could do your business, and go instead of you."

"You don't mean to say that you would like to cross the Atlantic, Jane?"

"I mean to say that there are few things in the world would please me better. What a fresh and glorious experience it must be to one who has never been far from home!"

"But think of the sea-sickness."

"Think of being out of sight of commonplace land for days and days together. Think how delightful it must be to be rocked on the great Atlantic rollers, and what a new and pleasant sensation it must be to know that there is only a plank between yourself and the fishes, and yet not to feel the least bit afraid."

Edward shuddered. "When you wake up in the middle of the night, and hear the wind blowing hard, you will think of me, won't you?" he said.

"Of course I shall. And I shall wish I were by your side to enjoy it. To be out in a gale on the Atlantic—that must indeed be glorious!"

Edward's fat cheeks became a shade paler,

“Don’t talk in that way, Jane,” he said. “One never can tell what may happen. I shall write to you, of course, and all that; and you won’t forget me while I’m away, will you?”

“No, I shall not forget you, Edward; of that you may be quite sure.”

Then he drew her towards him, and kissed her; and then, after a few more words, he went away.

It was just the sort of parting that his father would have approved of, he said to himself, as he drove down the avenue. No tears, no sentimental nonsense, no fuss of any kind. Privately he felt somewhat aggrieved that she had not taken the parting more to heart. “There wasn’t even a single tear in her eye,” he said to himself. “She doesn’t half know how to appreciate a fellow.”

He would perhaps have altered his opinion in some measure could he have seen Jane half an hour later. She had locked herself in her bedroom, and was crying bitterly. Why she was crying thus she would have found it

difficult to explain : in fact, she hardly knew herself. It is possible that her tears were not altogether tears of bitterness—that some other feeling than sorrow for her temporary separation from Edward Cope was stirring the fountains of her heart. She kept on upbraiding herself for her coldness and want of feeling, and trying to persuade herself that she was deeply sorry, rather than secretly—very secretly—glad to be relieved of the tedium of his presence for several weeks to come. She knew how wrong it was of her—it was almost wicked, she thought—to feel thus : but, underlying all her tears, was a gleam of precious sunshine, of which she was dimly conscious, although she would not acknowledge its presence even to herself.

After a time her tears ceased to flow. She got up and bathed her eyes. While thus occupied her maid knocked at the door.

Mr. Bristow was downstairs. He had brought some photographs for Miss Culpepper to look at.

“Tell Mr. Bristow how sorry I am that I

cannot see him to-day," said Jane. "But my head aches so badly that I cannot possibly go down." Then when the girl was gone, "I won't see him to-day," she added to herself. "When Edward and I are married he will come and see us sometimes, perhaps. Edward will always be glad to see him."

Hearing the front-door clash, she ran to the window and pulled aside a corner of the blind. In a minute or two she saw Tom walking leisurely down the avenue. Presently he paused, and turned, and began to scan the house as if he knew that Jane were watching him. It was quite impossible that he should see her, but for all that she shrank back with a blush and a shy little smile. But she did not loose her hold of the blind; and presently she peeped again, and never moved her eyes till Tom was lost to view.

Then she went downstairs into the drawing-room, and found there the photographs which Tom had left for her inspection. There, too, lying close by, was a glove which he had dropped and had omitted to pick up

again. "I will give it to him next time he comes," she said softly to herself. Strange to relate, her next action was to press the glove to her lips, after which she hid it away in the bosom of her dress. But young ladies' memories are proverbially treacherous, and Jane's was no exception to the rule. Tom Bristow's glove never found its way back into his possession.

Jane Culpepper had drifted into her engagement with Edward Cope almost without knowing how such a state of affairs had been brought about. When her father first mentioned the matter to her, and told her that Edward was fond of her, she laughed at the idea of Edward being fond of anything but his horses and his gun. When, later on, the young banker, in obedience to parental instructions, blundered through a sort of declaration of love, she laughed again, but neither repulsed nor encouraged him. She was quite heart-whole and fancy-free; but certainly Mr. Cope, junior, bore only the faintest resemblance to the vague hero of her

girlish dreams—who would come riding one day out of the enchanted Kingdom of Love, and, falling on his knees before her, implore her to share his heart and fortune for evermore. To speak the truth, there was no romance of any kind about Edward. He was hopelessly prosaic: he was irredeemably commonplace; but they had known each other from childhood, and she had a kindly regard for him, arising from that very fact. So, pending the arrival of Prince Charming, she did not altogether repulse him, but went on treating his suit as a piece of pleasant absurdity which could never work itself out to a serious issue either for herself or him. She took the alarm a little when some whispers reached her that she would be asked, before long, to fix a day for the wedding; but, latterly, even those whispers had died away. Nobody seemed in a hurry to press the affair forward to its legitimate conclusion: even Edward himself showed no impatience on the point. So long as he could come and go at Pincote as he liked, and

hover about Jane, and squeeze her hand occasionally, and drive her out once or twice a week behind his high-stepping bays, he seemed to want nothing more. They were just the same to each other as they had been when they were children, Jane said to herself—and why should they not remain so?

But, of late, a slight change had come o'er the spirit of Miss Culpepper's dream. New hopes, and thoughts, and fears, to which she had hitherto been a stranger, began to nestle and flutter round her heart, like love-birds building in spring. The thought of becoming the wife of Edward Cope was fast becoming—nay, had already become, utterly distasteful to her. She began to realize the fact that it is impossible to keep on playing with fire without getting burnt. She had allowed herself to drift into an engagement with a man for whom she really cared nothing, thinking, probably, at the time that for her no Prince Charming would ever come riding out of the woods; and that, if it would please her father, she might as well marry Edward Cope as any

one else. But behold! all at once Prince Charming *had* come, and although, as yet, he had not gone down on his knees and offered his hand and heart for evermore, she felt that she could never love but him alone. She felt, too, with a sort of dumb despair, that she had already given herself away beyond recall—or, at least, had led the world to think that she had so given herself away; and that she could not, with any show of maidenly honour, reclaim a gift which she had let slip from her so lightly and easily that she hardly knew herself when it was gone.

The eve of Lionel Dering's trial came at last. The Duxley assizes had opened on the previous Thursday. All the minor cases had been got through by Saturday night, and one of the two judges had already gone forward to the next town. The Park Newton murder case had been left purposely till Monday, and by those who were supposed to know best, it was considered not unlikely that trial, verdict, and sentence would all be got through in the course of one sitting.

The celebrated Mr. Tressil, who had been specially engaged for the defence, found it impossible to get down to Duxley before the five o'clock train on Sunday afternoon. He was met on the platform by Mr. Hoskyns and Mr. Bristow. His junior in the case, Mr. Little, was to meet him by appointment at his rooms later on. Tom was introduced to Mr. Tressil by Hoskyns as a particular friend of Mr. Dering's, and the three gentlemen at once drove to the prison. Mr. Tressil had gone carefully through his brief as he came down in the train. The information conveyed therein was so ample and complete that it was more as a matter of form than to serve any real purpose that he went to see his client. The interview was a very brief one. The few questions Mr. Tressil had to ask were readily answered, but it was quite evident that there was no fresh point to be elicited. Then Mr. Tressil went away, accompanied by Mr. Hoskyns; and Tom was left alone with his friend.

Edith had taken leave of her husband an

hour before. They would see each other no more till after the trial was over. What the result of the trial might possibly be they neither of them dared so much as whisper. Each of them put on a make-believe gaiety and cheerfulness of manner, hoping thereby to deceive the other—as if such a thing were possible.

“In two days’ time you will be back again at Park Newton,” Edith had said, “and will find yourself saddled with a wife, whom, while a prisoner, you were compelled to marry against your will. Surely, in so extreme a case, the Divorce Court would take pity on you, and grant you some relief.”

“An excellent suggestion,” said Lionel, with a laugh. “I must have some talk with Hoskyns about it. Meanwhile, suppose you get your trunks packed, and prepare for an early start on our wedding tour. Oh! to get outside these four walls again—to have ‘the sky above my head, and the grass beneath my feet’—what happiness—what ecstasy—that will be! A week from this time, Edith,

we shall be at Chamounix. Think of that, sweet one! In place of this grim cell—the Alps and Freedom! Ah me! what a world of meaning there is in those few words!”

The clock struck four. It was time to go. Only by a supreme effort could Edith keep back her tears—but she did keep them back.

“Good-bye—my husband!” she whispered, as she kissed him on the lips—the eyes—the forehead. “May He who knows all our sorrows, and can lighten all our burdens, grant you strength for the morrow!”

- Lionel’s lips formed the words, “Good-bye,” but no sound came from them. One last clasp of the hand—one last yearning, heart-felt look straight into each other’s eyes, and then Edith was gone. Lionel fell back on his seat with a groan as the door shut behind her; and there, with bowed head and clasped fingers, he sat without moving till the coming of Mr. Tressil and the others warned him that he was no longer alone.

As soon as Mr. Tressil and Hoskyns were

gone, Lionel lighted up his biggest meerschaum, and Tom was persuaded, for once, into trying a very mild cigarette. Neither of them spoke much—in fact, neither of them seemed to have much to say. They were Englishmen, and to-day they did not belie the taciturnity of their race. They made a few disjointed remarks about the weather, and they both agreed that there was every prospect of an excellent harvest. Lionel inquired after the Culpeppers, and was sorry to hear that the squire was confined to his room with gout. After that, there seemed to be nothing more to say, but they understood each other so well that there was no need of words to interpret between them. Simply to have Tom sitting there, was to Lionel a comfort and a consolation such as nothing else, except the presence of his wife, could have afforded him; and for Tom to have gone to his lodgings without spending that last hour with his friend, would have been a sheer impossibility.

“I shall see you to-morrow?” asked Lionel, as Tom rose to go.

"Certainly you will."

"Good-night, old fellow."

"Good-night, Dering. Take my advice, and don't sit up reading or anything to-night, but get off to bed as early as you can."

Lionel nodded and smiled, and so they parted.

Tom had called at Alder Cottage earlier in the day, and had seen Edith and Mrs. Garside, and had given them their final instructions. He had one other person still to see—Mr. Sprague, the chemist, and him he went in search of as soon as he had bidden Lionel good-night.

Mr. Sprague himself came in answer to Tom's ring at the bell, and ushered his visitor into a stuffy little parlour behind the shop, where he had been lounging on the sofa in his shirt-sleeves, reading Burton's "*Anatomy of Melancholy*." And a very melancholy, care-worn-looking man was this chemist whom Tom had come to see. He looked as if the perpetual battle for daily bread, which had been going on with him from year's end to

year's end ever since he was old enough to handle a pestle, was at last beginning to daunt him. He had a cowed, wobegone expression as he passed his fingers wearily through his thin grizzled locks: although he did his best to put on an air of cheerfulness at the tardy prospect of a customer.

Tom and the chemist were old acquaintances. Sprague's shop was one of the institutions of Duxley, and had been known to Tom from his early boyhood. Once or twice during his present visit to the town he had called there and made a few purchases, and chatted over old times, and old friends long dead and gone, with the melancholy chemist.

"You still stick to the old place, Mr. Sprague," said Tom, as he sat down on the ancient sofa.

"Yes, Mr. Bristow—yes. I don't know that I could do better. My father kept the shop before me, and everybody in Duxley knows it."

"I suppose you will be retiring on your fortune before long?"

The chemist laughed a hollow laugh. "With thirteen youthful and voracious mouths to feed, it looks like making a fortune, don't it, sir?"

"A baker's dozen of youngsters! Fie, Mr. Sprague, fie!"

"Talking about the baker, sir, I give you my word of honour that he and the butcher take nearly every farthing of profit I get out of my business. It has come to this: that I can no longer make ends meet, as I used to do years ago. For the first time in my life, sir, I am behindhand with my rent, and goodness only knows when and how I shall get it made up." Mr. Sprague's voice was very pitiable as he finished.

"But, surely, some of your children are old enough to help themselves," said Tom.

"The eldest are all girls," answered poor Mr. Sprague, "and they have to stay at home and help their mother with the little ones. My eldest boy, Alex, is only nine years old."

"Just the age to get him off your hands—

just the age to get him into the Downham Foundation School."

"Oh, sir, what a relief that would be, both to his poor mother and me! The same thought has struck me, sir, many a time, but I have no influence—none whatever."

"But it is possible that I may have a little," said Tom, kindly.

"Oh, Mr. Bristow!" gasped the chemist, and then could say no more.

"Supposing—merely supposing, you know," said Tom, "that I were to get your eldest boy into the Downham Foundation School, and were, in addition, to put a hundred-pound note into your hands with which to pay off your arrears of rent, you would be willing to do a trifling service for me in return?"

"I should be the most ungrateful wretch in the world were I to refuse to do so," replied the chemist, earnestly.

"Then listen," said Tom. "You are summoned to serve as one of the jury in the great murder case to-morrow."

Mr. Sprague nodded.

“You will serve, as a matter of course,” continued Tom. “I shall be in the court, and in such a position that you can see me without difficulty. As soon as the clock strikes three, you will look at me, and you will keep on looking at me every two or three minutes, waiting for a signal from me. Perhaps it will not be requisite for me to give the signal at all—in that case I shall not need your services; but whether they are needed or no, your remuneration will in every respect be the same.”

“And what is the signal, Mr. Bristow, for which I am to look out?”

“The scratching, with my little finger—thus—of the left-hand side of my nose.”

“And what am I to do when I see the signal?”

“You are to pretend that you are taken suddenly ill, and you are to keep up that pretence long enough to render it impossible for the trial to be finished on Monday—long

enough, in fact, to make its postponement to Tuesday morning an inevitable necessity."

"I understand, sir. You want the trial to extend into the second day; instead of being finished, as it might be, on the first?"

"That is exactly what I want. Can you counterfeit a sudden attack of illness, so as to give it an air of reality?"

"I ought to be able to do so, sir. I see plenty of the symptoms every day of my life."

"They will send for a doctor to examine you, you know."

"I suppose so, sir. But my plan will be this: not merely to pretend to be ill, but to be ill in reality. To swallow something, in fact—say a pill concocted by myself—which will really make me very sick and ill for two or three hours, without doing me any permanent injury."

"Not a bad idea by any means. But you understand that you are to take no action whatever in the matter until you see my signal."

"I understand that clearly."

After a little more conversation, Tom went, carrying with him in his waistcoat pocket a tiny phial, filled with some dark-coloured fluid which the chemist had mixed expressly for him.

On the point of leaving, Tom produced three or four rustling pieces of paper. "Here are thirty pounds on account, Mr. Sprague," said he. "I think we understand one another, eh?"

The chemist's fingers closed like a vice on the notes. His heart gave a great sigh of relief. "I am your humble servant to command, Mr. Bristow," he returned. "You have saved my credit and my good name, and you may depend upon me in every way."


As Tom was walking soberly towards his lodging, he passed the open door of the Royal Hotel. Under the portico stood a man smoking a cigar. Their eyes met for an instant in the lamplight, but they were strangers to each other, and Tom passed on his way. Next moment he started, and turned to look again. He had heard a voice say: "Mr. St. George, your dinner is served."

He had come at last, then, this cousin, who had not been seen in Duxley since the day of the inquest—on whose evidence to-morrow so much would depend.

“Is that the man, I wonder,” said Tom to himself, “in whose breast lies hidden the black secret of the murder? If not in his—then in whose?”

CHAPTER II.

THE TRIAL.

“OW say you, prisoner at the bar :
Guilty or Not Guilty ?”
“ Not Guilty.”

There was a moment's pause. A slight murmur passed like a ripple through the dense crowd. Each individual item, male and female, tried to wriggle itself into a more comfortable position, knowing that it was fixed in that particular spot for some hours to come. The crier of the court called silence where silence was already, and next moment Mr. Purcell, the counsel for the prosecution, rose to his feet. He glanced up at the prisoner for one brief moment, bowed slightly to the judge, hitched his gown well forward,

fixed one foot firmly on a spindle of the nearest chair, and turned over the first page of his brief.

Mr. Purcell possessed in an eminent degree the faculty of clear and lucid exposition. His manner was passionless, his style frigid. He aimed at nothing more than giving a cold, unvarnished statement of the facts. But then the way in which he marshalled his facts—going, step by step, through the evidence as taken before the magistrates, bringing out with fatal clearness point after point against the prisoner, gradually wrapping him round, as it were, in an inextricable network of evidence from which it seemed impossible for any human agency to free him—was, to such of his hearers as could appreciate his efforts, an intellectual treat of a very rare order indeed. Even Lionel had to ask himself, in a sort of maze: “Am I guilty, or am I not?” when Mr. Purcell came to the end of his exposition, and took breath for a moment while the first witness for the prosecution was being sworn by the clerk of the court.

That first witness was Kester St. George.

Mr. St. George looked very pale—his recent illness might account for that—but he showed not the slightest trace of nervousness as he stepped into the witness-box. It was noticed by several people that he kept his eyes fixed straight before him, and never once turned them on the prisoner in the dock.

The evidence elicited from Mr. St. George was—epitomized—to the following effect:—Was own cousin to the prisoner at the bar, but had not seen him since they were boys together till prisoner called on him in London a few weeks before the murder. Met prisoner in the street shortly afterwards. Introduced him to Mr. Osmond, the murdered man, who happened to be in his (witness's) company at the time. Prisoner, on the spot, invited both witness and Osmond to visit him at Park Newton. The invitation was accepted. Witness and Osmond went down to Park Newton, and up to the night of the murder everything passed off in the most amicable and friendly spirit. On that evening they all three dined

by invitation with Mr. Culpepper, of Pincote. They got back to Park Newton about eleven o'clock. Osmond then proposed to finish up the evening with a game at billiards. Prisoner objected for a time, but ultimately yielded the point, and they all went into the billiard-room. The game was to be a hundred up, and everything went on satisfactorily till Osmond accused prisoner of having played with the wrong ball. This prisoner denied. An altercation followed. After some words on both sides, Osmond threw part of a glass of seltzer-and-brandy into prisoner's face. Prisoner sprang at Osmond and seized him by the throat. Osmond drew a small revolver and fired at prisoner, but fortunately missed him. Witness then interposed, dragged Osmond from the room, and put him into the hands of his (witness's) valet, with instructions not to leave him till he was safely in bed. Then went back to prisoner, whom he found still in the billiard-room, but depressed in spirits, and complaining of one of those violent headaches that were constitutional with him.

Witness himself being subject to similar headaches, recommended to prisoner's notice a certain mixture from which he had himself derived much benefit. Prisoner agreed to take a dose of the mixture. Witness went to his own bedroom to obtain it, and then took it to the prisoner, whom he found partially undressed, preparing for bed. Prisoner took the mixture. Then he and witness bade each other good-night, and separated. Next morning, at eight o'clock, witness's valet brought a telegram to his bedroom summoning him to London on important business. He dressed immediately, and left Park Newton at once—an hour and a half before the discovery of the murder.

Cross-examined by Mr. Tressil :

The only one of the three who was at all the worse for wine on their return from Pin-cote was Mr. Osmond. Had several times seen him in a similar condition. On such occasions he was very talkative, and rather inclined to be quarrelsome. Osmond was in error in saying that prisoner played with the

wrong ball. Witness, in his position as marker, was watching the game very carefully, and was certain that no such mistake was made. Osmond was grossly insulting; and prisoner, all through the quarrel, acted with the greatest forbearance. It was not till after Osmond had thrown the brandy-and-seltzer in his face that prisoner laid hands on him at all. The instant after, Osmond drew his revolver and fired. The bullet just missed prisoner's head and lodged in the wall behind him. After Osmond left the room no animosity or ill-feeling was evinced by prisoner towards him. On the contrary, prisoner expressed his deep regret that such a fracas should have taken place under his roof. Had not the slightest fear that there would be any renewal of the quarrel afterwards, or would not have left for London next morning. Certainly thought that an ample apology was due from Osmond, and never doubted that such an apology would be forthcoming when he had slept off the effects of the wine. Was never more surprised or shocked in his life

than when he heard of the murder, and that his cousin was accused of the crime. It seemed to him too horrible for belief. Could not conceive of any possible motive that the prisoner could have for committing such a crime.

“Would you not almost as soon expect to have been the author of such a crime yourself?” asked Mr. Tressil.

Mr. St. George turned a shade paler than he was before, and for the first time he seemed to hesitate a little before answering the question. “Yes,” he said at last, “I should almost as soon expect such a thing. In fact, I cannot, even now, believe that my cousin, Lionel Dering, is the murderer of Percy Osmond.”

Mr. Tressil sat down, and Mr. Little rose to his feet.

“On the night of the quarrel prisoner complained to you of having a very violent headache?”

“He did.”

“And you proffered to administer to him a dose of a certain narcotic which you had

found to be efficacious in such cases yourself?"

"I did."

"How many drops of the narcotic did you administer to the prisoner?"

"Fifteen, in water."

"You saw him drink it?"

"I did."

"You yourself are troubled with violent headaches at times?"

"I am."

"At such times you administer to yourself a dose of the same narcotic that you administered to the prisoner?"

"I do."

"And you derive great benefit from it?"

"Invariably."

"How many drops of the narcotic do you take yourself on such occasions?"

"Fifteen, in water."

"Is that your invariable dose?"

"It is."

"Speaking for yourself, what is the effect it has upon you on such occasions?"

“It induces languor and drowsiness, and seems to deaden the pain. Its chief object is to insure a good night’s rest—nothing more.”

“How many years have you been in the habit of taking this narcotic?”

“At intervals, for a dozen years.”

“You have therefore become habituated to the use of it?”

“To a certain extent, yes.”

“But if you, after twelve years’ practice, are in the habit of taking only fifteen drops, does it not strike you that that quantity was somewhat of an overdose for a man who had never taken anything of the kind before?”

“It did not strike me as being so at the time. The prisoner is a strong and healthy man, and his headache was a very violent one.”

“But, in any case, the general effect would be to induce a sense of extreme drowsiness, which, in a little while, would result in a dull, heavy sleep—a sleep so heavy and so dull that the sense of violent pain would be deadened, and even lost for the time being?”

“Those are precisely the effects which might be expected.”

“How soon, after a dose has been taken, does the feeling of drowsiness come on?”

“In about a quarter of an hour.”

“Suppose now, that after you had taken a dose of the narcotic, you wished, for some particular reason, to keep broad awake; suppose that you had some important business to transact—say, if you like, that you had a murder to commit—how would that be?”

“I should find it utterly impossible to keep awake. The feeling of drowsiness induced is so intense that your whole and sole desire is to sleep: you feel as if you wanted to sleep for a month without waking.”

Mr. Little, having scored a point, sat down, and Mr. St. George left the witness-box. As he was stepping down into the body of the court his eyes met the eyes of Lionel Dering for the first time that day. It was but for a moment, and then Kester's head was turned deliberately away. But in that moment Lionel saw, or

fancied that he saw, the self-same expression flash from his cousin's eyes that he had seen in them that night, now many months ago, when they recognized each other across the crowd on Westminster Bridge—a look of cold, deadly, unquenchable hate, that nothing but death could cancel, with which, to-day, was mingled a look of scornful triumph that seemed to say, “My turn has come at last.” For one brief instant Lionel seemed to see his cousin's soul stand unveiled and naked before him.

As before, it was a look that chilled his heart and troubled him strangely. Kester had given his evidence in a perfectly fair and straightforward manner, without betraying the slightest animus against his cousin: indeed, he had distinctly stated more than once that he could not and would not believe that Lionel was guilty of the terrible crime for which he was arraigned, and the little sympathetic thrill which he threw into his soft musical voice at such times could hardly pass unnoticed by any one. But how reconcile such tokens of goodwill and cousinly affec-

tion with the fact that he had never once spoken a word to Lionel since they parted in the latter's bedroom on the night of the murder? Even at the inquest, and during the few days that elapsed after the murder before Lionel was committed for trial, his cousin had never come near him, or made any effort whatever to see him. Afterwards there had been vague news of his serious illness in London; but, even then, he might surely have written, or have dictated half a dozen lines, had it been only to say that he was too ill to come in person. But during all those weary days of waiting in prison there had come no word, no message, no token to tell Lionel that there was any such person as Kester St. George in existence.

And now, to-day, what did that look mean? To a man of Lionel's frank and unsuspecting disposition it seemed difficult, nay next to impossible, to believe that he must count his cousin, not as a friend, but as an enemy; and yet the conviction was beginning to dawn slowly upon him that such was indeed the

case. But with the dawning of that conviction there was growing up in his mind a dim, vague suspicion, shapeless as yet, but hideous in its shapelessness, to which neither name nor speech had yet been given, but which began to haunt him day and night like some weird nightmare which it was impossible to shake off.

The next witness that was called was Martin Rooke.

Was in prisoner's employ as under-footman at Park Newton. Had been appointed specially to wait on Mr. Osmond, that gentleman having brought no servant with him. One of his duties was to call Mr. Osmond about nine o'clock every morning. Remembered the morning of the ninth of May very well : in fact, should never forget it as long as he lived. Went as usual about nine o'clock—it might be a few minutes before or a few minutes after the hour—to call Mr. Osmond. Found the door unlocked, as usual, and went in after knocking once. Did not notice any signs of disturbance in the room. Went up to the bed with

the intention of calling Mr. Osmond. Saw at once what had happened. Mr. Osmond was lying on his back across the bed. After the first shock of the surprise was over, rushed downstairs and summoned assistance. All the servants who were about at once went upstairs with him into the room. Mr. Pearce, the butler, sent off post-haste for the nearest doctor. Then the rest of the servants, except witness, and Janvard, Mr. St. George's valet, went in a body to rouse Mr. Dering, who was sleeping in the room next to that of Mr. Osmond. One of Mr. Osmond's hands was open, the other was shut as if it were clasping something. Janvard took hold of the shut hand, and tried to open the fingers, when something fell from them to the floor. Janvard picked up the fallen article, when witness saw that it was a shirt-stud made of jet, set in filigree gold. "This stud is Mr. Dering's property," said Janvard. "I saw it in his shirt last night." Then witness and Janvard looked about the room and under the bed, to see whether they could find a

weapon of any kind, but could not. Then they left Mr. Osmond's room together, and went along the corridor to Mr. Dering's room. The door was wide open, and Pearce and the other servants were clustered round it. Witness peeped over the shoulders of the others, and saw prisoner standing in the middle of the room, looking like a man half dazed. There were red stains on his shirt-front, and there was a red-stained pocket-handkerchief lying at his feet. Janvard then showed prisoner the stud, and asked him whether it was his property. Prisoner said that it was, and asked him where he had found it. Janvard answered that he had found it in the hand of the murdered man. Prisoner sat down in the nearest chair, and witness thought he was going to faint. Then Pearce ordered everybody away, and went into the room and shut the door. Witness went back to Mr. Osmond's room, locked the door, and kept the key till the doctor came—with whom came also the superintendent of police.

The cross-examination of this witness eli-

cited nothing of any importance in favour of the prisoner.

The next witness was Pierre Janvard.

Witness deposed that on the night of the eighth of May he was sitting up for his master, Mr. St. George, who, after his return from Pincote, where he had been dining, had joined prisoner and Mr. Osmond in the billiard-room. About midnight the bell rang, and on answering it he found Mr. Osmond seated on the bottom stair of the flight that led to the bedrooms, and his master standing near him. Mr. St. George motioned to witness to get Mr. Osmond upstairs, and whispered to him that he was not to leave him till he had seen him safely in bed. Mr. St. George then went back to the billiard-room, and witness, after a little persuasion, managed to get Mr. Osmond as far as his own room. Mr. Osmond was half drunk, and was evidently much excited. He kept shaking his head, and talking to himself under his breath, but witness could not make out what he said. Had seen Mr. Osmond the worse

for wine several times before. It was the duty of Rooke, the previous witness, to attend to him at such times ; but Rooke was in bed, and he (witness) did not care to disturb him. After a little while Mr. Osmond was induced to get into bed. Witness lingered in the room for a few minutes till he seemed fast asleep, then left him, and neither knew nor heard anything more about him till Rooke rushed into the servants' hall, about nine o'clock next morning, with the news of the murder.

The rest of the evidence given by Janvard was little more than a recapitulation of that already given by Rooke. The evidence of the latter was confirmed with regard to the finding of the jet stud, and its recognition by the prisoner as his property. The stud itself was produced in court, and handed up to the jury for inspection.

The next witness was James Mackerith, M.D.

Dr. Mackerith began by stating that between nine and ten o'clock on the morning of

May ninth, a servant from Park Newton rode up to his house, and told him he was wanted, without a moment's delay, to look to a gentleman who had been murdered during the night. Witness got out his gig and started at once, and, meeting the superintendent of police on the way, that gentleman joined him on hearing his errand. Witness then went on to describe the finding and appearance of the body. Mr. Osmond had been stabbed through the heart with a knife or dagger. Death, which must have been almost instantaneous, had taken place at least five or six hours before the arrival of witness. There were no traces of any struggle. In all probability Mr. Osmond had been murdered in his sleep, or at the moment when he first opened his eyes, and before he had time to raise any alarm.

This witness was severely cross-examined by Mr. Tressil as to the possibility or otherwise of deceased having committed suicide, but nothing could shake him in his positive conviction that, in the present case, such a

theory was utterly untenable. After the cross-examination of Dr. Mackerith was brought to an end the court adjourned for luncheon.

It was now two o'clock, and although there were three or four minor witnesses still to be examined, the general impression seemed to be that, if the jury were not long in making up their minds, the whole unhappy business would be brought to an end by six o'clock at the latest.

The prisoner, who, by the judge's instructions, had quite early in the day been accommodated with a chair, had listened with quiet attention to the progress of the case, but had not otherwise seemed to take more interest in it than any ordinary spectator might have done. He had a thorough comprehension from the first that the trial must go dead against him, but he never abated by one jot the quiet, resolute calmness of his manner. He was the same to-day as he had been on the first day of his imprisonment; only, to-day, he was the focus of a thousand

inquisitive eyes; but he seemed as utterly unconscious of the fact as though he were sitting in the silence and solitude of his cell.

Hour by hour, as the trial went on, Tom sent brief notes by a messenger to Edith. In these notes all that he could say was that such and such a witness was under examination, and that everything was going on as favourably as could be expected. He knew how miserably ineffective such messages would be to allay the dreadful anxiety of her to whom they were addressed; but, as he asked himself, what more could he write? He took advantage of the few minutes allowed for luncheon to run up in person to Alder Cottage. Edith, that day, looked to him a dozen years older than he had ever seen her look before. Very pale and worn, but very calm also. But there was something in her eyes—the wild, yearning, terrified look of some poor hunted creature, as it were, who sees that for it there is no possible door of escape—which revealed to Tom something of the terrible struggle going on within. It

was but scant comfort that he could give her, but even for that she was grateful.

Tom found that he had still five minutes to spare when he got back to the court, so he hunted up Jabez Creede, whom he found haunting the purlieus of a neighbouring tavern, but apparently lacking either the money or the courage to venture inside. Tom supplied him with both, and, after two steaming glasses of rum and water, Jabez, with a sort of moist gratitude in his voice, declared that he felt better—"very much better indeed, thank you, Mr. Bristow, sir."

Tom, before going up to Alder Cottage, had contrived to have a brief note passed to Mr. Sprague. "I hope you are prepared, as I expect that I shall require your services."

On the reassembling of the court, Pearce, the butler at Park Newton, was the first witness called. He deposed to no material facts with which the reader is not already acquainted.

Next came Mr. Drayton, the Duxley superintendent of police, who told the story of his arrest of the prisoner, and how he had searched

the house and grounds of Park Newton, but could find no trace of the weapon by which the deed had been done.

Next came a Mr. Whitstone, uncle to the murdered man, to whom, as the nearest relative in England, had been handed over the effects of the deceased. Mr. Whitstone deposed that, after a careful examination of the said effects, he had come to the conclusion that nothing had been stolen. So far as he could judge, no article of value was missing; and consequently, whatever other motive might have been at the bottom of the crime, it could not have been done for the sake of robbery.

With the examination of one or two minor witnesses the case for the prosecution came to an end.

There were no witnesses to call for the defence, and Mr. Tressil at once arose to address the court.

Tom Bristow was sitting close behind three or four junior counsel, and in full view of the jury. Whispered one of these fledglings to

another, so that Tom could not help overhearing him: "That jet stud will hang him."

Answered the other: "Bet you a new hat old Tressil won't be on his legs more than thirty minutes."

"If the jury agree—and I don't see how they can disagree—the whole thing will be over by five thirty."

"Hope so, I'm sure. Meet you at eight for a game of pool?"

"I'm your man."

It was now twenty minutes to four o'clock.


Mr. Tressil began his speech for the defence. He had only got through the three or four opening sentences when one of the jury fell forward in the box, and, on being lifted up by two of his colleagues, it was found that he had been suddenly seized with illness. The juryman in question was Mr. Sprague, the chemist. He was carried at once into the open air. A buzz of curiosity and excitement ran round the court. Mr. Tressil sat down. The judge yawned politely behind his hand, and the junior barristers passed a snuff-box

surreptitiously from one to another. In the course of three or four minutes Dr. Mackerith, who had followed Mr. Sprague into the side room, came back into court. Addressing the judge, said he : " My lord, I regret to inform you that Mr. Sprague, the juryman, is very ill indeed, and that there seems little or no probability that he will be able to resume his duties for at least three or four hours to come."

His lordship looked very much discomposed, and blew his nose violently. " I never, in the whole course of my experience, recollect such a circumstance before," he remarked. " It is very annoying, and very unfortunate. It leaves me without any option in the matter. The court must stand adjourned till ten o'clock to-morrow morning."

CHAPTER III.

A BOTTLE OF BURGUNDY.

“ HERE goes ten of 'em. Old Hoskyns can never want me at this time of night. At all events, if he don't come soon he won't find me here. If a man can't call the time his own after ten o'clock at night, he's no better than a slave.”

The speaker was Jabez Creede, and he was sitting, with a short black pipe in his mouth, over a handful of fire—although the evening was a summer one—in the meanly furnished room which he called his home. In one hand he held a crumpled scrap of paper, the writing on which he now proceeded to read over again for the twentieth time.

“Please not to be out of the way this even-

ing, as I may possibly want you on important business.—T. Hoskyns.”

“Ugh!” growled Creede in disgust, as he flung the paper into the fire. “One might work one’s heartstrings out for old Hoskyns, and there would never be an extra half quid for a poor devil on pay-day. I wish Mr. Bristow would take to the business. He’s one of the right sort, he is. I wish——”

Here he was interrupted by a knock at the door. Presently his landlady entered. “Mr. Hoskyns is waiting below,” said the woman. “He wants you to put on your hat and coat, and go with him.”

Creede growled, put down his pipe, rose, yawned, stretched himself, inducted himself into a shabby grease-stained brown overcoat, pulled his battered hat over his gloomy brows, and stumbled downstairs. He had been drinking heavily during the day—indeed, the days when he did not drink heavily were few and far between—and both his gait and his tongue were in some measure affected by his potations.

Mr. Hoskyns was standing at the door, carrying in one hand the old blue bag with which Creede had been familiar for years.

“Make haste, man alive,” said the lawyer, impatiently. “I want you to go with me to the prison. Some most important evidence in our favour has just turned up, and I must see Mr. Dering at once. Here, catch hold of this.”

“It’s precious heavy,” grumbled Creede, as he took the bag.

“I dare say it is,” answered Hoskyns, dryly. “A good many clever brains have been at work on the contents of that bag. It’s weighty with wisdom and common sense—two commodities, Jabez Creede, with which you have never been overburdened.”

Not a word more passed between them till they reached the prison. The distance they had to walk was not great, and Mr. Hoskyns seemed anxious to get over the ground as quickly as possible, turning his face neither to right hand nor left, but going straight on till they halted at the gates. The great

prison looked as black, silent, and deserted as some City of the Dead. Hoskyns gave a tug at the bell-pull, and was just refreshing himself with a pinch of his favourite mixture, when a little wicket in the door was opened, and through the bars two keen eyes peered out into the semi-darkness.

“Ha, Warde, is that you?” he said, nodding cheerfully to the pair of eyes. “Rather late to look in upon you, eh? But it’s a matter of life and death—nothing less—that has brought us. Some most important evidence in our favour has turned up at the last moment, and it is imperative that I should see my client without a moment’s delay.”

“It’s long past the hour for visitors, Mr. Hoskyns, as you know; and it would be as much as my place is worth to——”

“Where’s the governor? where’s my friend, Mr. Dux?” interrupted Hoskyns, impatiently. “Fetch him. He’ll put the matter right in a moment.”

“Mr. Dux, sir, is somewhere in the town, and has not yet got home. But I’ll fetch

Mr. Jackson, sir; perhaps he may be able to do something for you."

Jackson, the chief night-warder, was quickly on the spot, and the case explained to him in a few words.

"It's against the regulations, of course, Mr. Hoskyns," said Jackson; "but considering the emergency of the case, and in the absence of Mr. Dux, I will take upon myself the responsibility of allowing you to see Mr. Dering."

"Thank you very much, Jackson—very much indeed," said the lawyer, with a flourish of his huge yellow silk pocket-handkerchief. "I give you my word of honour that it's nothing less than a case of life and death."

The little low-browed side-door had been opened by this time, and Mr. Hoskyns went in, followed by Jabez Creede carrying the bag of papers. Creede had accompanied his employer to the gaol several times before, and his face was well known to the warders.

"I can only ask that, under the circumstances, you will make your visit as short a

one as possible ; and I hope, with all my heart, that you will be able to extricate Mr. Dering from his difficulty."

"Jackson, you may take my word for it," said Hoskyns, seriously, "that, before to-morrow night at this time, Mr. Dering will be a free man."

"I am heartily glad to hear it, sir, and I wish you a very good-night."

"Great heaven ! Hoskyns, what has brought you here at this uncanny hour ?" exclaimed Lionel, starting up from his pallet, on which he had thrown himself without undressing, as the lawyer and Creede were ushered into his cell and the door locked behind them.

"I have got great tidings for you, Mr. Dering. Splendid tidings !" said Hoskyns, as he took the bag from Creede. "But sit down, sir, and don't excite yourself, because I shall require your very best care and attention during the next few minutes." Speaking thus, he took off his broad-brimmed hat and deposited it tenderly on Lionel's bed ; then he drew a chair up to the little deal table, motioned

Lionel to take the opposite chair, and Creede to take the third and only remaining one. The latter gentleman, either from innate modesty, or because he was afraid that his breath might smell too strongly of rum, took care to plant himself a yard or two away from the table.

“Yes, sir, some splendid news—something that will astonish the world to-morrow,” continued the lawyer, as he dived into his bag, and fished therefrom a carefully folded sheet of foolscap. “Read that, Mr. Dering—read that carefully through,” he said, as he handed the paper in question to Lionel. “But, above all things, control your feelings.”

Lionel took the paper, opened it, and read. Mr. Hoskyns, leaning forward with his elbows on the table, took a pinch of snuff slowly and artistically, staring across, meanwhile, very hard at Lionel.

The paper ran as under :—

“Be careful not to betray me by word or look. I am here to effect your escape. Follow

my lead in everything, and show no surprise at anything that I may say or do.

“T. B.”

Despite all his efforts to the contrary, Lionel could not keep his face from changing colour during the reading of these words.

“Very extraordinary, is it not,” said the lawyer, as he took back the paper, “that this evidence should not have been forthcoming till the very last moment?”

“Very extraordinary, indeed,” said Lionel, gravely.

He could hardly believe the evidence of his senses. The voice, the features, the hair, the whiskers, the dress, the snuff-box, and the pocket-handkerchief, were all part and parcel of the genuine Hoskyns; but when he looked intently through the gold-rimmed spectacles, he saw there the eyes—not to be mistaken for the eyes of any other man—of his faithful friend, Tom Bristow.

“I have shown the paper to Tressil,” said Tom, still keeping up his assumed character,

for it is hardly necessary to observe that Creede was not in the secret, "and he is quite agreed with me as to its vital importance. In fact it is at his request that I have come here to-night. There will be two or three telegrams to send off, and at least a couple of witnesses to hunt up, and all before the court opens in the morning. But before going into these details, I mean to drink your health—yes, sir, to drink your very good health, and to the happy acquittal which is sure to be yours in a few hours from the present time."

"I am much obliged to you, my dear Hoskyns," said Lionel, "but I'm afraid that my means of hospitality at present are limited to a copious supply of cold water."

"I've provided for that contingency, my dear sir, by bringing with me a bottle of prime old Burgundy from my own cellar," and he produced from his bag a tempting-looking black bottle with the cork already half-drawn. "And now for a wineglass."

"I've nothing better to offer you than a tea-cup."

“Under the circumstances we will make shift with the tea-cup.”

It was handed to him by Lionel. “The tea-cup turns out to be a coffee-cup,” said Tom. With that, he went down on one knee, drew the cork, half filled the cup with wine, and then offered it to Lionel.

“Not till you and Creede have both drunk to my health and acquittal,” said the latter.

Tom took back the cup, gave utterance to an appropriate sentence or two, and tossed off the wine. Then going down again on one knee, he proceeded to refill the cup. The table was between him and Creede, and the latter, who had not failed to prick up his ears at the mention of something to drink, could not see clearly how Tom was engaged. He could hear the wine gurgle from the bottle into the cup, and that was enough for him. He did not see Tom’s nimble fingers extract a tiny phial from his waistcoat pocket, and pour the contents into the wine.

“Creede grumbled because my bag was so heavy,” said Tom, with a chuckle. “He

wouldn't have said a word had he known what was inside it. Here, man, drink this off to Mr. Dering's very good health, and tell me whether you ever tasted anything better in your life."

He handed the cup to Creede, who rose somewhat unsteadily from his chair to take it. "I drink to your very good health, Mr. Dering," he said, in a loutish sort of way, "and may you have a good deliverance." And carrying the cup to his mouth with a shaking hand, he drank off the contents at a draught.

Both Tom and Lionel were watching him keenly. He crossed the cell and put the cup down on the window-ledge, making a wry face as he did so. Then he sat down again on his chair.

"I am afraid, Creede, that you have vitiated your palate by accustoming it to inferior drinks," said Tom, "and that you don't know a good wine when you taste it."

"I'd sooner have one quartern of real old Jamaica than a gallon of that rubbish," growled Creede, with ill-disguised contempt.

“Now for business,” said Tom. “There’s not a minute to lose.” And with that he fished a formidable-looking heap of documents from the depths of his bag. “Of course, the first thing to do,” he went on, “is to get hold of our two new witnesses, Robinson and Davis. I think I can lay hands on them without much difficulty.” And with that he went off into a long rigmarole respecting the supposed steps which it would be needful to take in the new state of affairs, but keeping a careful watch on Creede, meanwhile, out of the corners of his eyes.

Presently Creede’s eyes began to glaze a little. Then they closed. Then they opened and closed again. Then his head sank forward on his breast, and his arms fell limply by his sides. Both the men were watching him intently. Suddenly Tom sprang from his seat and was just in time to catch the inanimate body in his arms, as it was sliding from the chair to the floor.

Tom held up a warning finger to Lionel, who had also started from his chair. For full

two minutes he rested on one knee without moving, supporting Creede in his arms. "He is fast now, I think," he said at last. "Help me to lift him on to the bed."

When the unconscious law-clerk had been laid on Lionel's bed, said Tom: "Now help me off with his coat, waistcoat, necktie, collar, and boots." It was a work of some little difficulty to accomplish all this, but it was done at last. Then, by Tom's instructions, Creede was stretched on the bed with his face to the wall, in the natural position of a sleeping man, and the bedclothes pulled over him.

Up to the present time Lionel had not asked a single question, but he could contain himself no longer. "In heaven's name, Bristow, what do all these strange proceedings mean?"

"They mean, Lionel Dering," said Tom, turning on him gravely, almost sternly, "that I am here to-night for the purpose of effecting your escape."

"Of effecting my escape!"

"What other purpose do you think would have brought me here in this disguise?"

“But—but——” stammered Lionel, and then he broke down utterly.

“Every minute is precious,” said Tom. “There is no time to argue the case. Put yourself into my hands, and it will go hard but you will be a free man in an hour’s time. Refuse my aid, and in less than three weeks from now you will be lying, a strangled corpse, in a murderer’s grave.”

Lionel shuddered and stared at Tom, but spoke not a single word.

“The trial is going against you, and to-morrow morning will see you condemned to death. Are you prepared to die by the hangman’s hand for a crime of which you know nothing? Are you prepared to leave your young wife to the tender mercies of a world which will not fail to remember that her husband was a murderer? Live, man, live, if it be only for vengeance—if it be only to track out and hunt down the real murderer—if it be only to wipe the foul stain of blood from the name you bear—from the name which was borne by your father before you!”

“But why to-night?—why try to escape to-night?” pleaded Lionel. “The verdict has not yet been given. Who says that there is no chance of my acquittal?”

“I say it. Hoskyns says it. Tressill thinks it. You will be condemned to death to-morrow morning. After that, all chance of escape will be gone for ever. From that moment you will never be left alone till that most awful moment of all when you stand on the drop, pinioned, sightless, waiting for the bolt to fall. Dering, it must be to-night or never!”

“Bristow, I am in your hands—do with me as you will!” cried Lionel with emotion; and suiting the action to the word, he rose from the edge of the bed, and placed both his hands in those of his friend.

“That’s all I ask, old boy,” said Tom warmly. “Now sit down here, and obey my instructions, and don’t bother me with any questions.”

Lionel did as he was told, and sat down close under the gas light.

“There’s no help for it,” said Tom. “Both beard and moustache must be sacrificed.”

“So be it,” said Lionel philosophically. “They will grow again if need be.”

Next moment a pair of glittering scissors were playing round Lionel’s mouth and chin, and in two minutes the entire mass of yellow beard and moustache was swept clean away. This, of itself, was almost enough to disguise Lionel beyond ordinary recognition. The chin and upper lip were left stubbly on purpose. Creede’s face was nearly always stubbly—he rarely shaved more than once a week—and Lionel was now going to personate Creede. But Creede was very dark complexioned, while Lionel was just the opposite; so Tom’s next operation was to produce from his wonderful bag a small bottle of some kind of liquid, with which he proceeded to stain the hands, face, and neck of his friend. Next came a wig, which he had had specially made in London, and which was a very clever copy of the head of hair it was intended to simulate. It proved to be an excellent fit. With

the fixing, by means of gum, of a scrap of ragged black hair under Lionel's chin—which was Creede's notion of a beard—the first part of Lionel's disguise was completed.

“Take off your coat, waistcoat, and cravat, and induct yourself into Mr. Creede's duplicates of those articles. You shudder at the thought. I do not wonder at it; but, for the time being, you must put all your finer feelings into your pocket. But first,” added Tom, diving again into his bag, “pull on this pair of old black trousers over your own, after which you can go on with the remainder of your dressing while I finish with Silenus here.”

Once more the bag came into requisition, and from it Tom brought forth a light-coloured wig, with which was combined a beard and moustache precisely the same in colour and appearance as those of which Lionel had been so recently despoiled. With these he proceeded to decorate the head and face of the unconscious Creede. It was necessary to do this, because the bed was exactly opposite

the cell door, and once or twice in the course of the night the warder on duty was instructed to open the little wicket, and see that everything was right with his prisoner. As Lionel lay in bed he was in full view of the warder, and it thus became requisite to "make up" Creede into some semblance of the real prisoner, it not being at all unlikely that the warder might come round and take his usual look within a few minutes of the departure of Tom and Lionel.

When the wig, beard, and moustache had been duly arranged, and the bedclothes pulled close up round Creede's neck, Tom stepped back as far as the door in order to study the general effect. It was highly satisfactory. When the gas was turned down to the minimum point at which it was allowed to burn during the night, no one, without close examination, could have told that the man lying on the bed was other than Lionel Dering.

Satisfied so far, Tom next turned to Lionel, who by this time had duly inducted himself into Creede's garments. Here, also, the

general effect was satisfactory. One reason why Tom's choice had fallen on Creede was because he and Lionel were both about the same height and build.

Tom gave a few final artistic touches to the tout ensemble — arranging the frayed old black necktie, and the limp, dirty collar, after Creede's own slovenly fashion—and finishing by putting into Lionel's reluctant hands the law-clerk's greasy and much-worn hat.

"Years ago," said Tom, "when I amused myself with private theatricals, I little thought that my talent for 'making up' would ever be brought into such valuable requisition. You would almost deceive Hoskyns himself if you were to walk into his office, especially by gaslight."

"And you would quite deceive him," said Lionel. "He would take you for his 'double,' and think his time was nearly come."

"There is one thing still to do," said Tom. "Creede's walk is rather a peculiar one. Now watch me, and try whether you can imitate it."

In about three minutes Lionel was tolerably perfect. "You know what kind of a voice Creede has," said Tom. "Should you be accosted by any of the warders as we go out, you must do your best to imitate it. And now I think we are ready for a start."

He crossed over to the bed, to take another look at the unconscious Creede. He felt his pulse carefully, and then lifted up one of his eyelids and examined the pupil underneath.

"Let us hope that you have not given him an overdose of the narcotic," said Lionel.

"No fear of that," answered Tom. "Remember that my father was a doctor, and that I have some knowledge of drugs. I have made this man my study for weeks. If my calculations are correct, he will sleep for about three hours, not longer—and won't there be a hullabaloo when he awakes!"

"But assuming that we get safely out of the prison—what then? Where am I to go? How am I to get rid of this cursed disguise?" said Lionel.

“You are to go home to the wife of your bosom. Everything has been thought of—everything provided for your safety. And now for the attempt. Don’t forget that you are Jabez Creede. Take the bag and follow me at a respectful distance. Pull your hat over your brows and turn up the collar of your overcoat, and, above all things, don’t seem to be in a hurry.”

Tom gave a final glance round the cell to see that everything was in order, turned the gas partially down, and then tapped at the door. A warder came in answer to the summons, and unlocked the door. Tom and Lionel stepped out into the corridor. The warder gave a glance into the cell, and saw, as he thought, his prisoner lying on his pallet with his face turned to the wall, as he had seen him lying many a time before.

“Tired out, poor fellow,” whispered Tom in the warder’s ear as the latter proceeded to relock the door. “But I’ve brought him good news, and I warrant he’ll sleep as sound as a top to-night.”

“Anyhow he’ll know his fate by this time to-morrow,” said the warder.

They followed the man along the corridor and through two or three passages, till they reached the outer courtyard. Here they were joined by two other warders. Tom, all this time, had been talking volubly, and making ample use of his big pocket-handkerchief—doing his best, in fact, to keep his companion from being over-much noticed. But now had come the most dangerous moment of all. They were all crowded together close to the outer gate, waiting for it to be unfastened—the three warders, Tom, and Lionel—under the light of a flaring gas-lamp. The slightest hesitation—the least want of presence of mind—might have been fatal to everything.

Happily, Tom was equal to the occasion. While waiting for the bolts to be withdrawn, his thumb and finger slid into his waistcoat pocket, and the quick ears of the warders caught the pleasant chink of gold.

“Mr. Dering,” said Tom, “would insist

on my presenting you gentlemen with ten sovereigns to divide amongst you, as a slight token of his appreciation of your unvarying kindness. Here's the money; and I hope you won't forget to drink Mr. Dering's health before you are many hours older."

He pressed the gold into the hands of the nearest warder. The men's thoughts at once became occupied with the consideration of a fair and equal division of the gift. A moment later the door stood wide open. Tom, followed by Lionel, passed slowly out.

"We hope you will convey our thanks to Mr. Dering," said the head warder, "and we are greatly obliged to you, sir. We are not allowed to receive presents of any kind, but in this case——"

"Which is an exceptional one," said Tom, "you won't refuse."

"If we were sure," said the warder in a low voice, "that it would never come to the governor's ears——"

"You may take my word that it never will. You can trust me, of course; and, in

business matters, Creede here is as silent as the grave."

"In that case——"

"You will act like men of sense and keep the money. Good-night."


"Good-night, sir, and many thanks to you. Good-night both."

Thank Heaven! at last the terrible door was shut behind them.

Ten minutes later a black shadow crept silently up to the door of Alder Cottage. Front and back the little house was all in darkness; but the door was ajar, and close behind it knelt—she had stood there till she could stand no longer—Edith, listening—listening with beating heart and straining nerves—with every sense on the alert. The black shadow touched the door. The door yielded to the touch. Another black shadow started up from the ground. Husband and wife met heart to heart. Lionel Dering was saved.

CHAPTER IV.

MR. DRAYTON'S SUSPICIONS.

HE escape of Lionel Dering from Duxley Gaol created an extraordinary sensation throughout the country. Government at once offered a reward of two hundred pounds, which, a week later, was increased to four hundred. The telegraph was set to work in every direction, and at every sea-port in England and on the Continent sharp eyes were made sharper still by the possibility of winning so magnificent a prize. But day passed after day till a fortnight had come and gone, and still there was not the slightest clue to the whereabouts of the missing man; nor the smallest scrap of comfort for the disconsolate soul of Mr.

Drayton, the superintendent of the Duxley police.

However positive Jabez Creede, his landlady, and the various prison warders might be that Mr. Hoskyns, and no one but he, was the man who had assisted Lionel Dering to escape, it was easily proved that they were one and all in the wrong. On the evening of the escape Mr. Hoskyns had dined with Mr. Tressil and three or four other members of the bar, and had not parted from them till after midnight. This fact the gentlemen in question all came forward and swore to, and Mr. Hoskyns was at once exculpated from any share in the extraordinary escape of his client. With Jabez Creede it fared somewhat more hardly. Every one at first was inclined to regard him in the light of an accomplice, and it was not till after he had spent upwards of a week in prison, and had been examined and remanded about a dozen times, that he was able to prove how really innocent he was of any complicity in the heinous crime of which he was accused.

But who, then, was the consummate actor who had so cleverly outwitted, not only drink-soddened Jabez Creede, but the keen-eyed warders of the prison, who, for weeks past, had been in the habit of seeing the real Hoskyns almost daily, and who, one would have thought, were about the last men in the world to be so easily deceived? Government supplemented its second reward for the capture of the escaped prisoner by offering a hundred and fifty pounds for the capture of the man who had helped him to escape. But Government, to all appearance, might as well have never offered to unloosen its purse-strings.

From the moment Lionel Dering and the arch-impostor who aided and abetted him in his nefarious scheme set foot outside the walls of Duxley Gaol, they seemed to have vanished into thinnest air. Like creatures of a dream, they had melted utterly away; and not all the ten thousand practised eyes that were on the look-out for them here, there, and every-

where, could succeed in finding the faintest clue to their hiding-place.

Of the two, as far as his private feelings went, Mr. Drayton would much rather have captured the sham lawyer than the escaped prisoner. He had no ill feeling towards Mr. Dering. Under similar circumstances, who would not have attempted to escape? But towards the sham Hoskyns, who had deceived everybody with such apparent ease, he certainly felt a degree of animus which had kept him in a chronic state of ill-temper both at home and abroad ever since the discovery of the escape, and which would have caused it to fare but ill with the miscreant in question, could Mr. Drayton's heavy hand but once have been laid upon his shoulder.

The celebrated Mr. Whiffins, of Scotland Yard, had, in the first instance, been sent down to investigate the case, and had, so to speak, taken the conduct of it into his own hands. But Mr. Drayton did not believe in Mr. Whiffins—did not believe in his talents as a detective, and secretly resented his inter-

ference. But, by-and-by, Mr. Whiffins went back to London not much wiser than he had left it, and Mr. Drayton was left to pursue his investigations in peace.

Many and profound were the cogitations of the worthy superintendent of police, indulged in the privacy of his own circle, before the following deductions worked themselves out to a logical issue in his mind :—The man who personated Mr. Hoskyns so successfully must evidently have been thoroughly acquainted with the speech, dress, gait, manner, and every minute peculiarity in the appearance and habits of that gentleman, down even to his yellow pocket-handkerchief and his silver snuff-box. He must also have had some knowledge of Jabez Creede, and of the position he held with regard to his employer. He must also have known Mr. Dering, and Mr. Dering must have known him : the supposition, in fact, being that the two men were bosom friends—for who but a staunch friend would have run the risk of failure in attempting so remarkable an escape ? Then, the man, who-

ever he might be, must also have had some acquaintance with the gaol and with the gaol officials. Had he not mentioned two or three of the warders by name? Then, he must be a man about the same size and build as Mr. Hoskyns, with a thin, clear-cut face, something like that of the old lawyer. Having worked out his problem so far, Mr. Drayton's next care was to look carefully round, and endeavour to "spot" the man in whom the various requirements of the case were most evidently combined.

The result of the cautious inquiries instituted by Mr. Drayton was, that suspicion pointed in one direction, and in one only.

There was only one person to be found to whom the whole of the deductions worked out in the superintendent's mind would clearly apply. That person was Mr. Tom Bristow.

Mr. Bristow was a friend of the prisoner, and had visited him almost daily in gaol. He was well acquainted both with Mr. Hoskyns and Jabez Creede; and, taking the dif-

ference of age into account, he was not unlike the old lawyer in personal appearance.

“I think I’ve nailed you, my fine fellow!” said Mr. Drayton triumphantly to himself one evening, as he shook the ashes out of his pipe and brought his cogitations to an end for the time being.

But it is one thing to suspect a man, and another to have sufficient evidence against him to warrant his arrest. The evidence against Mr. Bristow, such as it was, was entirely presumptive, and even Sir Harry Cripps, the senior magistrate, anxious as he was that the culprit should be brought to light, had yet some doubts as to the advisability of issuing a warrant for the arrest of Tom. Now, as it happened, Sir Harry and Mr. Culpepper were old and intimate friends, and when, in the course of conversation, Mr. Drayton chanced to mention that Mr. Bristow had more than once been up to Pincote to dinner, Sir Harry caught at the idea, and decided to take no further steps in the matter till after he had consulted with his old friend.

So he at once dropped the squire a note, in which he asked him to look in at the Town Hall on a matter of private business when next in Duxley.

Next morning brought the Squire, and the case was at once laid before him. He laughed loud and long at the idea of "young Bristow," whom he knew so well, having had anything to do with so nefarious a transaction. He did not scruple to express in voluble terms his gratification at poor Dering's escape—thereby shocking Sir Harry's susceptibilities as a magistrate not a little—but that Bristow was the disguised conspirator who had assisted him to escape was a thought which found no resting-place in the squire's mind. "He's too simple—too straightforward ever to think of such a thing—letting alone the carrying of it out," said Mr. Culpepper. "You don't know Bristow as well as I do, or you would never connect such an idea with his name."

"Suppose we send for him," said Sir Harry, "and put a few questions to him quietly in this room?"

“With all my heart,” said the squire; “and have your pains for your reward.”

So a messenger was sent round to Tom’s lodgings with Mr. Culpepper’s compliments, and would Mr. Bristow be good enough to step up to the magistrate’s private room at the Town Hall for a few minutes?

Tom, who happened to be at home, went back with the messenger without a moment’s hesitation; but it would, perhaps, be too much to say that his heart did not misgive him a little as he walked smilingly into the lion’s den. Mr. Culpepper shook hands with him, and pointed to a chair next his own. Sir Harry nodded and said, “How do you do, Mr. Bristow?” but looked anxious and flurried. Drayton coughed behind his hand, and quietly changed his position so as to get between Tom and the door. “There’s no knowing what may happen,” said the superintendent to himself. “He may grow desperate as soon as he finds it’s all up with him.”

“We have sent for you, Bristow,” said the squire, “that we may have a little talk with

you about Mr. Dering's extraordinary escape."

"It was indeed an extraordinary escape, sir," said Tom; "but I am not aware that I am in a position to furnish you with any special information respecting it. The 'Duxley Gazette' seems to me——"

"No—no, that isn't what we mean," interrupted the squire. "To be plain with you, Bristow, a report has got abroad—no matter how it originated—that you were somehow mixed up in that very queer piece of business."

"In other words, people think that because I was Mr. Dering's friend, it must be I who assisted him to escape?"

"That's just about it," said the squire. "You couldn't have put it in plainer language."

"Well, gentlemen, I will tell you candidly that believing firmly, as I do, in Mr. Dering's innocence, I would gladly have assisted him to escape had it lain in my power to do so.

But I think I shall be able to prove to your entire satisfaction that, unless it is possible for a man to be in two places at once, I was in a direction quite the opposite of that of Duxley gaol at the exact time that the escape was being carried into effect."

"There! what did I tell you?" said the squire triumphantly. "I knew the lad was innocent."

"Mr. Bristow has yet to enlighten us as to his proceedings on the night in question," said Sir Harry, stiffly.

"In the first place," said Tom, "if you will kindly send for Mrs. Potts, my landlady, who is, I believe, a most trustworthy woman, you will find on inquiry of her that, on the night of the escape, the clock had just struck eleven as I reached home. Mrs. Potts, will remember the circumstance, because, a minute or two after going indoors, I heard her fastening up the house as usual, and I called over the banisters to ask her the time, my watch having stopped for want of winding up. On hearing my question, Mrs. Potts held up her

candle to the face of the old case-clock in the entrance-hall, and called out that it was just five minutes past eleven. Now, if I was in my own lodgings at five minutes past eleven, I could not have had anything to do with the escape of Mr. Dering, who, it was proved in evidence by the warders, did not set foot outside the gates till a quarter of an hour past that time."

"Of course not. The thing's as clear as daylight," said the squire, heartily.

"Perhaps, Sir Harry, you will kindly send for Mrs. Potts," said Tom. "I should like you to hear the corroboration of my story from her lips, while I am here."

"Drayton, send one of your men with my compliments to Mrs. Potts, and——"

"Beg pardon, Sir Harry," said Drayton, with some confusion, "but I found out two or three days ago, in consequence of certain private inquiries made by me, that what Mr. Bristow says about Mrs. Potts and the clock is quite true. According to that clock, Mr.

Bristow, on the night of the escape, was at home at eleven to the minute."

"What on earth do you mean, Drayton?" said Sir Harry, growing very red in the face. "If you knew all this before, why let me send for Mr. Bristow? If what you say is true, there is no case whatever against this gentleman, and I can only apologize to him for having brought him here at all."

Drayton turned very white, but he was a man not easily put down. "Such things have been known," he said, "as clock fingers being put either backward or forward so as to suit people's own convenience."

"Drayton, you are a bigger fool than I took you to be," said Sir Harry, irately, "and I never had a very high opinion of your brains."

Drayton, metaphorically speaking, sank into his boots.

"As it happens," said Tom, "I am in a position to offer you a still stronger confirmation of the impossibility of my having had anything to do with effecting the escape of Mr. Dering."

"We shall be very happy, Mr. Bristow, to listen to anything you have to say," said Sir Harry, politely.

"Then I must ask you, Sir Harry, to kindly answer me one or two questions," said Tom.

"As many as you like, Mr. Bristow."

"Were not you yourself in Duxley till rather a late hour on the night of the escape?"

"I was. I did not leave the White Bear till nearly ten o'clock."

"Precisely so. You and your son together in your dog-cart. When you reached Dead-man's Hollow—you know the place I mean; that deep cutting in the road about two miles out of Duxley, where the trees, planted thick on both sides, nearly meet overhead?"

"I know the place you mean," said Sir Harry.

"When you reached that spot, you did not see a man sitting on a broken bit of wall in the gloomiest part of the road?"

"I certainly did not."

"He had been taking a constitutional by

starlight. The night was close and oppressive, and he had sat down, hat in hand, to gather breath before climbing the opposite hill.

“I certainly did not see the person to whom you allude.”

“But he saw you, Sir Harry. He saw you come to a dead stop within a dozen yards of where he was sitting. One of the traces had suddenly given way. You got down to ascertain what was the matter, and as you did so, you made use of a rather strong expression. Would you like me, Sir Harry, to repeat the exact words made use of by you on the occasion in question?”

“Not at all, Mr. Bristow, not at all. Not requisite, I assure you,” said Sir Harry, hastily.

“You alighted from the dog-cart,” resumed Tom. “Your son got down after you, and you gave him one of the side-lamps to hold while you did your best to mend the broken trace. As you got into the trap again, the church clock at Leyland chimed the quarter. ‘We shall be very late home, father,’ said your son.

‘Mamma will have given us up long ago.’ What you answered I did not hear, but next moment you were driving away again as hard as you could, as if to make up for lost time. And now, gentlemen, I hope you will agree with me that it was a sheer impossibility for the man who was a witness of this incident to have been at that very moment in Duxley gaol assisting a prisoner to escape.”

“Mr. Bristow, not another word,” cried Sir Harry. “I regret exceedingly that you were ever called upon for any such explanation. Mr. Culpepper and I are going to have luncheon in five minutes. Will you do me the favour of joining us?”

“This will be something to tell Jane when I get home,” said the squire with a chuckle. “I believe you are a prime favourite with my Jenny,” he added, turning to Tom.

So Tom lunched at the White Bear with Sir Harry and the squire, and parted from them afterwards on the best of terms.

But Mr. Drayton, although staggered by Tom’s statement, was by no means convinced

in his own mind of the latter's innocence. "Artful—very," was his muttered comment as he left the room. "But hang me if I don't think he's been bamboozling Sir Harry all the way through."

And Mr. Drayton was not far wrong in his supposition.

Tom *had* put the clock at his lodgings half-an-hour back, and had purposely called his landlady's particular attention to the time of his arrival at home, knowing well how such evidence would tell in his favour should worthy Mrs. Potts ever be called upon to give it.

As for the incident of the broken trace, Tom had obtained his knowledge of that quite by accident. As he was taking a country ramble the day after the escape, a sudden thunder-shower drove him for shelter into a little roadside public-house. He sat down and called for some refreshment. While waiting for the rain to abate, his attention was attracted by the conversation of two labouring men who were sitting on the oppo-

site side of the partition against which he was seated. One of the two men was recounting some incident to his companion, with all that particularity as to time and place, and the actual words overheard, which, not unfrequently, makes the narrations of uneducated persons so thoroughly vivid and life-like. The man, it appeared, was on his way home, and had stopped to rest awhile in the dark part of the road, when Sir Harry's dog-cart drove up. Then came the sudden halt and the after-incidents, exactly as told by Tom at second-hand from the man.

"I'd have gone and lent him a hand," added the man, "if it had been anybody but Sir Harry Cripps. But he gave me three months once because a hare was found in my pocket, which had got there quite accidental, so that if he had broke his neck it wouldn't have broke my heart."

It was the story thus told which Tom had boldly seized upon and appropriated as an experience of his own when before Sir Harry ; with what result has been already seen.

It had been a serious question with Tom whether, after the escape of Lionel, he should continue to call at Alder Cottage as he had been in the habit of doing previously, or whether he should absent himself entirely till the first ardour of the hue-and-cry was over, and his friend had been safely smuggled away to some more distant hiding-place. After mature consideration, Tom decided that it would be better in every way that he should keep up his visits as usual—as if, in fact, the escape of Lionel Dering were a matter of no moment either to the inmates of Alder Cottage or to himself. To break off his visits might merely serve to breed suspicion where none existed already; besides which it was absolutely necessary that he should see Lionel occasionally, in order that the means might be concocted and agreed upon for his further escape.

So Tom came and went as usual, and in no wise altered the mode of his daily life. But, after a time, he became conscious that not only he himself, but the inmates of Alder Cottage, had been placed under police surveillance.

Wherever he went his footsteps were dogged—not offensively, but cautiously, respectfully, and at a distance. The cottage, too, was, so to speak, surrounded with spies.

This gave Tom some anxiety. It seemed to show that the suspicions of Messrs. Whifins and Drayton were beginning to concentrate themselves nearer home. And to a certain extent he was right. After slow and painful cogitation, and not till more than three weeks after the escape, Mr. Drayton arrived at the conclusion that it was just possible that Mr. Dering might never have attempted to go abroad at all, or even to get as far as London, but might be snugly hidden somewhere close at hand. And if so—where?

The result of this question was the watching by day and night of Alder Cottage, and of the comings and goings of its inmates.

A week passed away and Mr. Drayton began to despair. His men had absolutely nothing to report, except that the ladies went out occasionally for a short walk; that Martha Vince, the servant, went out every morn-

ing to make the needful domestic purchases ; and that Mr. Bristow called every other day and was the only visitor at the cottage.

Mr. Drayton was seriously considering as to the advisability of withdrawing his men, when one of them brought him a piece of information which startled him considerably. This man, Tidey by name, had been on watch in a clump of trees a short distance from the cottage, when, so he averred, he saw a corner of one of the blinds drawn on one side, and a man's face peer out along the road, as if expecting some one. Tidey was positive that it was a man's face. He was equally certain it was not the face of Mr. Bristow, which was well known to him by sight. That it could not be Mr. Bristow was proved in another way, by another man, who had seen that gentleman leave the cottage only two hours previously.

Mr. Drayton decided to strike while the iron was hot. He went at once to Colonel Chumley, one of the magistrates—he would not go to Sir Harry Cripps again, who, indeed, happened not to be sitting that day—

and having deposed to his belief that Lionel Dering was at that moment hiding at Alder Cottage, he at once obtained the requisite warrant, authorizing him to search the premises in question.

Half an hour later, followed by four picked men in plain clothes, Mr. Drayton set out for the cottage.

CHAPTER V.

HIDE AND SEEK.



WHEN Lionel Dering found himself safe inside Alder Cottage, with his wife's arms around his neck, the door locked behind him, and no sounds of pursuit in the distance, he broke down utterly, and, big, strong man though he was, he cried like a child.

For days afterwards he asked nothing more than to lie on the sofa in his wife's dressing-room, holding her hand in his, letting his eyes rest on her face, and feeling her soothing presence over and around him like rain on a desert land.

The bow that had been bent so long was now unstrung ; the terrible ordeal was at an

end. The rebound was so immense, the change so sudden and wonderful, from the imminent prospect of a disgraceful and horrible death to comparative safety and the loving shelter of his wife's arms, that mind and body were alike shaken for a little while: and, for the first forty-eight hours after his escape, Lionel Dering was like a man just beginning to recover from some lingering and painful illness, and had to be waited upon and tended as though he were a veritable invalid.

But joy rarely kills; and basking in the warmth and sunlight of his wife's love, Lionel breathed an atmosphere of happiness beyond what words could tell, which, like ozone to a sick man, gave him back by degrees his health both of mind and body, and endowed him with strength and vigour to fight the stern battle still before him.

Every precaution against a surprise was taken by the inmates of Alder Cottage. All the lower windows had been fitted with screws, so as to render it impossible for them to be opened from the outside, and strong

chains had been fixed to all the doors, so that they could be partially opened, and yet no one be able to gain admission without leave. Night and day the chains were kept fastened, and were only let down for a moment at a time to allow of the egress or ingress of the inmates, or of their sole visitor, Tom Bristow. The blinds were kept lowered as much as possible ; and at nightfall, when the lamps were lighted, shutters and thick curtains effectually precluded any spying from the outside.

The wardrobe brought by Tom from London, as already stated, was fixed in a recess in Edith's dressing-room, and it was this room which Lionel chiefly occupied. Here Tom used to come and see him, and many were the long talks they had together over Lionel's future plans and prospects.

The first step was to get Lionel safely out of England. By the end of the first week after his escape, he began to chafe under the restraints imposed upon him by the necessities of the case. He became possessed by a

longing, almost irresistible in its force, to go out of doors—to breathe the free air of heaven beyond the close walls of the cottage, if only for one short hour; and only by the earnest entreaties of his wife and Tom was he persuaded to keep within.

Mr. Drayton's spies had not been set to watch the cottage four-and-twenty hours before Tom knew of it, and it only made him all the more anxious to get Lionel away. But the question of whither he should go was beset with many difficulties. Many plans had been discussed by the two friends, but nothing had been decided upon when Mr. Drayton and his merry men set out for Alder Cottage, one windy afternoon, armed with the search-warrant issued by Colonel Chumley.

The superintendent's imperative summons at the front door echoed through the little house, blanching the cheeks of the two ladies, and causing Martha Vince to drop the plate she was carrying as though it were red hot. Edith sprang to the window and peered out between the venetians. "They are come—

the police!" she said with a gasp. "Don't let them in, Martha, till I tell you that I'm ready."

Then she flew upstairs. Lionel had been dozing over a novel on the sofa; but the summons had aroused him, and Edith found him standing against the door, waiting to hear her news. "What is it?" he asked.

"Oh, darling—the police!" And then her arms went round him as if in their white shelter he could find a protection from every danger.

"Let them come," said Lionel, as he stooped and kissed the upturned yearning face on his shoulder. "It is better so. When once they have searched and found nothing, we shall be left in peace—our suspense will be at an end. Let them come."

"But if——?" The terror in her eyes said the rest.

"Fear nothing, dearest. I have no fear myself. They will not find me. Be you but calm and resolute, and all will go well."

Again the superintendent's imperative summons sounded through the house.

Husband and wife kissed each other hurriedly; then Lionel disappeared into his hiding-place, and Edith, having made sure that no traces of his presence were visible in the room, glided downstairs, and motioned with her hand for Martha Vince to open the door.

Martha undid the bolts and chains, and flung open the door. Mr. Drayton entered brusquely, followed by two of his men. The remaining two were instructed to wait outside and see that no one quitted the premises without leave.

"Do you always keep your visitors waiting as long as you have kept me?" asked Mr. Drayton roughly, as he advanced into the passage.

Edith came forward out of the parlour, her embroidery in her hands. "Before answering your question, sir," she said, "you will perhaps allow me to ask what your business here may be, or by what right you walk into

my house without first obtaining permission to do so?"

"By the right, ma'am, which the law has placed in my hands." He spoke with more politeness this time, raising his hat as he did so. This was no servant whom he could bully and frighten at will, but a lady, as any one could see at the first glance, and one beneath whose calmly cold and slightly contemptuous scrutiny his own eyes fell abashed and self-confused.

"I fail to apprehend your meaning, sir."

"I am the unfortunate bearer of a warrant authorizing me to search the premises known as Alder Cottage."

"A warrant to search my house! Do you suspect us of being smugglers?—or what?"

"It is considered by those in authority that there is just a faint possibility that Mr. Lionel Dering, who lately escaped from prison, may be hidden somewhere about the place."

Edith's little musical burst of laughter was delicious. "Do you hear that, aunty?" she

called out to Mrs. Garside, who was sitting at work in the parlour. "They positively suspect poor you and me of being two conspirators, and of having Mr. Dering hidden somewhere about us—in your work-basket, aunty, or up the chimney, or under the sofa. Is it not a charming idea?"

"My dear, I always told you that you were too much of a madcap," responded Mrs. Garside as she quietly proceeded to re-thread her needle. "You must remember that, although this is supposed to be a free country, you are not allowed to laugh at the police."

"But I do so enjoy being thought a conspirator. I wish we had poor Mr. Dering under our roof, don't you, aunty? I would give very much to know what has become of him." Then, turning to Martha, she added, "Martha, you will please conduct these gentlemen all over the house, from garret to cellar—there must be no room held sacred from them—not even our bedrooms. And be careful that you treat them with respect."

"With the deepest respect," chimed in

Mrs. Garside, "or you may find yourself a prisoner before you are aware of it."

"And now, sir," said Edith, turning to Drayton, to whom this style of treatment was altogether new and puzzling, "you will perhaps oblige me by beginning your perquisition with this room," indicating the little parlour; "after which my servant will accompany you over the rest of the house."

"No perquisites allowed in the police, ma'am," said Drayton, with the air of a man whose moral sense was shocked by the bare mention of the word.

"You misunderstand me," said Edith, with a smile. "What I meant was, that I wish you to search this room first of all, as I should not like my aunt to be disturbed more than is absolutely necessary."

"Don't trouble about me, my dear," said Mrs. Garside. "This good gentleman's visit is quite a godsend. We see so little company, and get so very mopey sometimes, that the incident of this afternoon comes quite as a pleasant change, and will serve us to talk about for many a day to come."

So Mr. Drayton, coughing deferentially behind his hand, did just take a cursory glance round the little chintz-furnished room. "Not such a fool as to expect to find him there," he said to himself as he bowed himself out again.

Then Edith made him a haughty little curtsey, and politely shut him out, as though she had done with him for ever and a day.

"I don't like that man's look," whispered Mrs. Garside as soon as the door was closed.

"Nor I," answered Edith. "I know by his eyes that he is brimful of suspicion; and yet I cannot believe that he is acting on any positive information." Her assumption of indifference had vanished utterly. She was the loving, anxious, heart-wrung wife again.

She sank on her knees and rested her head for a moment on Mrs. Garside's knee. The killing anxiety of the last few weeks was beginning to tell upon her in despite of herself. But next moment she was on her feet again, and, gliding across the floor, she crouched down and glued her ear to the keyhole.

“They are in the breakfast-room,” she whispered. And then in a little while: “Now they are in the kitchen.” A few minutes later came the ominous words: “And now they are going upstairs!”

Pale and terror-stricken the two ladies waited, every minute seeming an hour, while the heavy footsteps overhead went tramping with slow, methodical precision from room to room. So long as they kept out of the fatal dressing-room it did not matter, but that was the very place, or so it seemed to Edith, where they lingered longest of all. “Will they never come out of that room?” she kept on asking herself with agonized earnestness. And then her very heart would seem to stand still with the intensity of her listening. The slow seconds measured themselves accurately by the clock on the chimney-piece, but still no sound reached her to indicate that any discovery had been made; and at length, with intense relief and thankfulness, she heard the heavy footsteps come tramping downstairs.

The footsteps passed slowly into the dining-

room, and then Edith could hear the low muttering of two or three voices, as though the superintendent and his men were deep in consultation.

“Surely the worst is over,” said Mrs. Garside. “A few minutes more, and they will be gone.”

But suddenly Edith started to her feet with an exclamation. “There were three men went upstairs,” she cried, “but only two of them have come down! Why has not the third man come down with the others?”

“Are you quite sure that you are not mistaken?” asked Mrs. Garside, anxiously.

“Quite sure, aunt—only too sure. I cannot bear to be shut up here any longer. Better to know the worst at once. I will go and see for myself.”

And before Mrs. Garside had time to interpose, Edith had opened the door almost without a sound, had passed out of the room, and was gliding noiselessly upstairs, so as not to be heard by the men in the dining-room.

Edith was right. Three men had gone up-

stairs and only two had come down. The laggard was Mr. Drayton's second in command—Sergeant Tilley.

Mr. Tilley was a tall, lanky, weak-kneed man, with watery eyes, and a slow, hesitating way of speaking, rather uncommon among gentlemen of his profession. He had been on duty for the last twelve hours, and, feeling thoroughly worn out, had sat down to rest for a moment on a corner of the sofa in Edith's dressing-room, and there he was left by Mr. Drayton and the other constable when they followed Martha Vince downstairs. He sat down to rest for a minute, and his thoughts flew home to Mrs. Tilley and the five little Tilleys, who had to be fed, clothed, and lodged—after a fashion—out of his scanty wage. “Ah!” he sighed to himself, “if I could but spot this Mr. Dering, and get the reward, what a happy man I should be! But there's no such luck. Bill and Kitty will have to go without their shoes for another week or two; and as for the old woman's new gown, why——”

Sergeant Tilley never finished his sentence. Deceived by the silence in the room, believing all danger to be at an end, and cramped in every limb from standing so long in one position without moving, Lionel Dering touched the spring, pushed open the false back of the wardrobe, and prepared to emerge from his hiding-place. The first object that met his startled gaze was the terror-stricken face of Sergeant Tilley, who, seated on the extreme edge of the sofa, was gazing at him as though he were some unsubstantial ghost come to revisit the pale glimpses of the moon.

Lionel changed colour, and his heart sank within him. To go back was useless—impossible. Instead of retreating, he advanced a step or two into the room, and then stood still.

The sergeant rose to his feet. His presence of mind was coming back to him. Visions of four hundred golden sovereigns floated before his dazzled eyes. He too advanced a step or two. “You are my prisoner,” he said, and he stretched forth his hand as if to arrest Lionel.

But that very instant his hand was seized, and Edith was before him—her white, pleading face, tearful and agonized, uplifted to his, her white and slender fingers clasped tightly round his bony wrist.

“No—no—no!” she cried, in low, hurried accents. “You must not—you shall not arrest him! You are a man, a husband, a Christian! He is my husband, and he is innocent. I swear before Heaven that he is innocent! Arrest him, and his blood will lie at your door, and be a curse upon you and yours for ever.”

“I—I must do my duty, ma’am,” stammered Tilley. “This gentleman is my prisoner, and he must come along with me.”

“Four hundred pounds are offered for his capture,” said Edith. “No one but you knows that he is here. Keep that knowledge to yourself—lock it up as a secret in your own breast, and six hundred pounds shall be put into your hands this very night.”

“Six hundred pounds!” murmured Tilley. He was staggered by the amount.

“Yes, two hundred pounds more than the reward shall be yours, and your hands will be free from the stain of innocent blood. Look at him—look at that man,” she cried, “and tell me, is that the face of a murderer?”

Lionel came a step or two nearer. “My wife has but spoken the truth,” he said. “As there is a Heaven above us, I am as innocent of the murder of Mr. Osmond as you are!”

“You are a good man—you are a kind-hearted man,” pleaded Edith. “I can see it in your face—I can read it in your eyes. You have a wife and children. Think what you can buy for them—think with what comforts you can surround them, out of six hundred pounds. But stain your hands with that vile blood-money, and you will be a marked man among your fellow-men to the last hour of your miserable life!”

“Tilley, Tilley, where are you? Why don’t you come down?” called Mr. Drayton from below.

“Coming, sir—coming,” cried Tilley.

For a moment he hesitated. But Edith

was still before him. His rough hands were still clasped by her delicate fingers. Her lovely face—pallid, despairful—was gazing up at him with tearful and beseeching eyes. Sergeant Tilley was but a man, and a soft-hearted one. Here was a beautiful woman begging and praying of him to accept six hundred pounds. “I never could stand out against a woman’s tears,” he said to himself; and being no more than mortal, he succumbed.

“Have the money ready by nine o’clock to-night,” he said in a hoarse whisper. “I’ll come for it myself, and give three taps at the kitchen-door. One of you can just open the door a few inches, and put the money out, and I’ll take it—and you needn’t see me and I needn’t see you.”

Edith pressed the sergeant’s rough hand to her lips, in a passion of gratitude, and then fell back in a dead faint. With a warning finger held up to Lionel, Mr. Tilley quitted the room, and joined the superintendent downstairs. Five minutes later Martha Vince shut the door behind the three men. Mr. Drayton

was quite satisfied that Lionel Dering was hidden nowhere about Alder Cottage. "But for the life of me," he said to his companions as they walked down the garden, "I can't understand why the doors and windows are fastened up with so many chains, and bolts, and screws, unless they've got something hidden somewhere that they are precious sweet on, and want to keep all to themselves."

"Ah," responded Tilley with a knowing shake of the head, "women are but timorous creatures when they live by themselves, and Alder Cottage is a lonely place at the best of times."


At five minutes past nine that same evening three low, distinct raps sounded on the back door of Alder Cottage. The door was opened a little way, and a hand, holding a bag full of gold and notes, was thrust out into the darkness. Another hand in the darkness took the bag. There was a sound of retreating footsteps; the door was shut and bolted, and all was dark and silent as before.

All these things were duly told to Tom

Bristow when he next visited Alder Cottage. Lionel was disposed to think that, now the search had proved unsuccessful, all danger, at least for a little while to come, was at an end. But Tom was by no means so satisfied on that point, and what had just happened only made him all the more anxious to get his friend away to some safer and more distant hiding-place. After many conversations and much discussion pro and con., a plan was at length agreed upon which Tom, with characteristic energy, at once began to put into execution. A few days were necessary for the preparation of certain details. But, before those few days were over, quite a new and unexpected turn was given to the course of events at Alder Cottage.

CHAPTER VI.

FLOWN.

HE man whom Tom Bristow had employed for the construction of the wardrobe which had proved of such essential service to Lionel Dering, was a cabinet-maker named Paul Wigley, who kept a small shop in the neighbourhood of Seven Dials, London. It was the very obscurity of this man, and the pettiness of his business, which had tempted Tom to employ him. It was not probable that a man in his position would ask any impertinent questions as to the purpose for which such a strange piece of workmanship was intended, so long as he was paid ready-money for his job. And so far Tom was right. Wigley made the wardrobe

according to instructions, and treated the whole affair as though he were in the habit of making articles of furniture with false backs to them every day in the week. But Tom's first mistake lay in thinking that such a man would be less likely than a more reputable and well-to-do tradesman to connect in his own mind, as two links in a possible chain, the escape of a prisoner from Duxley gaol with the fact of having sent to that very town a wardrobe so constructed that a man might be hidden away in it with ease. Tom's second mistake lay in letting him know the destination of the wardrobe. "I ought to have had it sent to the railway-station addressed simply to my order," he said to himself, "and afterwards, when it was entirely out of Wigley's hands, have re-addressed it myself to Alder Cottage."

Tom was quite aware that on this point he had committed an error of judgment; but he never apprehended that the slightest danger could spring therefrom.

Mr. Wigley, after working very hard for six

days, generally devoted a portion of the seventh to posting himself up in the news of the week. After a hearty dinner, it was his delight on a Sunday afternoon to sit at ease and enjoy his newspaper and his pipe. He had taken great interest in the escape of Lionel Dering, as detailed in his favourite journal; and week after week he carefully culled whatever scraps of news he could find, that bore the remotest reference to that strange occurrence. One day he came across the following lines, which he read to his wife.

“We understand that up to the present time the police have obtained no clue to the whereabouts of Mr. Dering, the prisoner whose clever escape from Duxley gaol was duly chronicled in our columns a few weeks ago. It was thought at one time that the right track had been hit upon, but, when promptly followed up, it ended in nothing—or rather, in the capture and detention of an innocent person for several hours. So long a time has now elapsed since the escape, that the chances of the prisoner being recaptured

would seem to be very problematical indeed."

"I hope, with all my heart, that he'll get safe away," said Mrs. Wigley. "What a strange thing it was, Paul, that that queer wardrobe which you made for a gentleman a month or two since should be for somebody in Duxley—the very town where this Mr. Dering broke out of prison. What a capital hiding-place that would make for him, Paul, dear! All the police in England would never think of looking for him there."

"You talk like a fool, Maria," growled Mr. Wigley between the puffs at his pipe.

But however foolishly Mrs. Wigley might talk, the idea originated by her was one which took such persistent hold on her husband's mind that, three days later, he found himself at Duxley, and telling the tale of the wardrobe in the office of the superintendent of police. Very fortunately indeed it happened that on this particular afternoon Mr. Drayton was away on business at a neighbouring town, and that Sergeant Tilley was acting as deputy

in his stead. Tilley listened to the man's story with dismay. He had pocketed the six hundred pounds; and now he felt almost as much interested in Mr. Dering's getting safely away as Tom Bristow himself. What was to be done? His first thought was to pooh-pooh Wigley and his story, and to persuade the little cabinet-maker to return to town by the first up train. But Wigley was not a man to let himself be snuffed out in that way, and he quietly intimated that he would await the return of Mr. Drayton himself. Then Tilley's manner changed, and, while professing to agree with him in everything, he persuaded Wigley to take his leave for a couple of hours, by which time, he told him, Mr. Drayton would have returned and would be at liberty to see him.

No sooner was Wigley gone than, leaving the office in charge of a subordinate, Tilley hastened by back streets and unfrequented ways to Alder Cottage. He asked for Edith and told her his story in a few hurried words. His counsel was that, at every risk, Mr.

Dering must be got away from the cottage before seven o'clock that evening, as there was no doubt that shortly after that hour Mr. Drayton might be expected to pay a second domiciliary visit. He, Tilley, would take care that the policeman on duty on that particular beat should be withdrawn for a couple of hours on one pretext or another, so that there might be no fear of any interruption from him. Then, after a last word of warning, he went.

As it fell out, Tom Bristow was at the cottage at the very time of Tilley's visit. A council of war was immediately held. That Lionel must leave the cottage, and at once, was the one imperative necessity. Had it been mid-winter, instead of summer, he could easily have stolen away through the darkness, but at seven o'clock on an August evening everything is almost as clearly visible as at mid-day.

However, go Lionel must; and the only question was—whither should he go? Where should he hide himself for a few hours?—or till the plan of action already decided upon

by the two friends could be safely carried into effect?

In this extremity, Tom's thoughts seemed to revert naturally to Jane Culpepper; in which direction, indeed, they had travelled very often of late. Why not appeal to her? Why not ask her to shelter Lionel for a night or two at Pincote? He knew, without asking, that Miss Culpepper would be ready and glad to befriend Lionel at every risk.

A few minutes past seven o'clock, Tom Bristow walked leisurely out through the front door of Alder Cottage. A minute or two later Lionel Dering, dressed like a carpenter, with a paper cap on his head and a basket of tools slung over his left shoulder, walked leisurely out through the back door, and keeping Tom well in view, followed him at a distance of thirty or forty yards. Avoiding as much as possible the main thoroughfares of the little town, Tom dived through one back street after another, till after several twistings and turnings, he reached a lonely lane leading into some fields, through which ran a footpath

in the direction of Pincote. Step for step, Lionel followed, smoking a short black pipe, and having the gait and manner of a man who is pretty well worn out with a long day's work. Through the fields they went thus in single file, without decreasing the distance between each other or speaking a word, till at length the path brought them to the outskirts of a tiny wood at one corner of the Pincote estate. There was not a soul to be seen, and the two men, overleaping the hedge, were soon buried among the tangled undergrowth of the plantation. Here they held a hurried consultation. It would not do for Lionel to venture any nearer to Pincote till after dark, and Tom had yet to contrive some means of seeing Miss Culpepper alone, and of explaining to her the position of Lionel and himself. The Squire, when at home, generally dined between six and seven, and the best time for seeing Jane would be while her father was taking his post-prandial nap before he joined her in the drawing-room. So, leaving the wood, Tom went slowly toward Pincote,

wishing that the shades of evening would deepen twice as fast as they were doing just then ; while Lionel, left alone, clambered up into the green recesses of a sturdy chestnut, and there, safely hidden from any chance passers by, awaited, with what patience was possible to him, the signal which would announce to him the return of his friend.

Once again Mr. Drayton's imperative summons echoed through Alder Cottage, but this time he was expected, and had not to wait so long for admission. As before, Martha Vince admitted him, and, as before, Edith came out of the little parlour at the first sound of his voice.

"Is the lady within whom I saw when I was here before?" asked the superintendent of Martha.

"Yes, I am here, as you see, Mr. Drayton," answered Edith. "To what circumstance do I owe the honour of a second visit from you?"

"Sorry to have to confess it, ma'am, but there was one part of the house which we

seem to have quite overlooked when we were here last. You won't, perhaps, object to our having a look at it now?"

"My objections, I am afraid, would be of little value. I have no option but to submit."

"I must do my duty, you know, ma'am. Very disagreeable it is to do at times, I assure you."

"Doubtless, very. Martha, show these gentlemen whatever part of the house they may wish to see." With these words Edith went back into the parlour, but this time she did not shut the door.

Mr. Drayton was followed into the house by Wigley, the cabinet-maker; and the rear was brought up by a constable in plain clothes.

"Upstairs, if you please," said the superintendent to Martha. "I am quite satisfied with the downstairs part of the house."

So upstairs they all tramped, and without pausing, Drayton led the way into Edith's dressing-room. Wigley's first mention of the wardrobe had brought to his recollection the fact of there being such a piece of furniture

as the one described in one of the upstairs rooms.

Now that the moment for making the grand discovery was at hand, it would have been difficult to say whether the excitement of Drayton or of Wigley was the more intense. The latter was lured on by the prospect of the glittering reward that would become his, if, through his instrumentality, the escaped prisoner should be recaptured. Drayton was led on by a purely professional ardour. To succeed where the great Whiffins from Scotland Yard had failed, even though that success were won by a fluke, and by no brilliant stroke of his own genius, was in itself something to be proud of—something that would bring his name prominently before the notice of his superiors.

“This is the article that I’ve been speaking to you about,” said Wigley, striking the polished surface of the wardrobe with his open palm.

“Open it, Mr. Wigley, if you please,” said the superintendent. “This is a very curious

piece of furniture, indeed, and I should like to examine it thoroughly."

So Wigley proceeded to open it slowly and lovingly, as a man having a deep admiration for the work of his own hands. First the outer doors were flung wide open, revealing a few empty garments drooping drearily from the pegs. But when Mr. Wigley, with a solemn finger, touched the secret spring, and the false back swung slowly open on its secret hinges, the three men pressed forward with beating pulses and staring eyes, feeling sure that in another moment the great prize would be in their grasp.

Drayton's fingers closed instinctively on the handcuffs in his pocket, while Martha Vince looked on from the background with a cynical smile.

The false back swung slowly open, and revealed the hiding-place behind. But it was empty.

"Flown!" said Wigley, with a deep sigh, all his golden visions vanishing like the shadow of a dream.

“Sold! most infernally sold!” exclaimed Drayton, his face a picture of blank discomfiture. “It’s no good waiting here any longer,” he added, as he turned on his heel. “He’s got clear away, never fear.”

Downstairs the three men tramped, without another word, and, marching out, banged the front door behind them with a force that made every window in the little cottage rattle in its frame.

“Gone at last, thank Heaven!” exclaimed Edith, as the echo of the retreating footsteps died away. “If only I had tidings that my darling is safe, then I almost think that I should be quite happy.” Unbidden tears were in her eyes as she stood for a moment with clasped hands and upturned face, while from her heart a silent prayer of thankfulness winged its way on high.

Tom Bristow lingered about the grounds and shrubberies at Pincote till the dusky evening was deepening into night, and the lamps in the drawing-room were alight. Then, with

cautious footsteps, he stole nearer the house, and at last found himself ensconced behind a clump of holly, and close to one of the three French windows which opened from the drawing-room on to the lawn. The venetians were down, but between the interstices he could obtain a clear view of the room and its inmates. The inmates were only two in number—Miss Culpepper and another young lady whom Tom had never seen before. The Squire, if at home, had not left the dining-room. How pretty Jane looked as she sat there in the lamp-light, in her soft flowing dress of white and mauve, plying her needle swiftly—for Jane's fingers were rarely unemployed—while her companion read to her aloud! Her every look, her every gesture, went direct to Tom's heart. He was caught in the toils at last—this cold, self-willed, unimaginative man of the world—and he began to find that, even for such as he, such bonds are not easily broken.

“This is either love or something very much like it,” he muttered to himself. “I find that

I am just as great an ass as my fellow-men. What is it in this girl that fascinates me so strangely? She is not particularly clever, or handsome, or witty, or accomplished. I have been in the society of women who could outshine her in every way : and yet, for me, she is the one woman whom the world holds—the one woman whom I ever felt that I could love. It is easy to talk about dying for a woman, and not very difficult to do so, I dare say. The grand test of love, as it seems to me, is to live with a woman and to love her at the end of twenty years as well as you loved her on your wedding-day. Now, of all the women I have ever met, yonder fairy is the only one with whom I should care to try the experiment. *Her* I fancy I could love as well at the end of a hundred years as of twenty : and yet of what the charm consists that draws me to her—whence it comes, and how she exercises it—I know no more than the man in the moon.”

But Tom’s love-reveries did not absorb him to the extent of making him oblivious of the particular object which had brought him to

Pincote. It was requisite that he should see Jane alone, and nothing could be done so long as Jane's companion was in the room with her. Besides which, the squire might come in at any moment, and then his last chance would be gone. Should the worst come to the worst, he was prepared to go up to the front door, knock like any ordinary visitor, and ask to see Miss Culpepper openly and boldly. But it was only as a last resource that he would adopt a measure which, should it come to the squire's ears, could only lead to inquiry; and inquiry on the squire's part was what Tom was particularly wishful to avoid. Not that the old man would not have been as stanch as steel in such a case, and would have done anything and everything to assist Lionel. But, unfortunately, he had a garrulous tongue, which could not always be trusted to keep a secret—which often betrayed secrets without knowing that it had done so; and in a matter so grave as the one in which he was now engaged, Tom was careful to avoid the slightest unnecessary risk. It would be far better for

every one that the squire should rest in happy ignorance, till the future should bring its own proper time for revealing everything.

Whenever any particular question pressed itself strongly on Tom's mind for solution, he had a habit of looking at it, not from one or two points of view only, but from several ; and if nineteen ways out of a difficulty proved, from one cause or another, to be unavailable, he generally found the twentieth to be the very mode of egress for which he had been seeking. So it was in the present case. After considerable cudgelling of his brains, he hit on a simple expedient which seemed to him to be worth trying, but which might or might not prove successful in the result.

On the occasion of Tom's first visit to Pin-cote, among other pieces played by Jane in the drawing-room after dinner, was a plaintive little waltz, entitled "*Venez à Moi*," which took his fancy more than anything he had heard for a long time. Later on in the evening he had asked Jane to play it again, and for days afterwards the air clung to his

memory, and seemed in some strange way to mix itself up in his musings whenever he thought of Jane. As if Jane had some faint divination that such was the case, the next time Tom was at Pincote she played the waltz again—this time without being asked ; and so also on the third and last time he spent an evening with her. It was on this third occasion, as the final bars of the waltz were dying away in slow-breathed sweetness, that the eyes of Tom and Jane met across the piano—met for a moment only ; but that one moment sufficed to reveal a secret which, as yet, they had hardly ventured to whisper to themselves. From that day forth, never so long as they lived, could that simple French melody be forgotten by either of them.

Tom thought of Blondin, and determined to try the effect of “ *Venez à Moi* ” in attracting Jane’s attention. Only, as he happened to live in this unromantic nineteenth century, and to be possessed neither of a harp nor of skill to play one, there was nothing left for him but to whistle it.

Retiring from the window a dozen yards or more, but still keeping well within the shelter of the shrubbery, Tom accordingly began to "flute the darkness with his low sweet note." In other words, he began to whistle "*Venez à Moi.*" At the end of five minutes, which to him seemed more like an hour, the venetians were lifted, and some one could be seen peering into the darkness. A few quick strides carried Tom to the window.

Although startled when the first notes of the familiar air fell on her ear, Jane was not long in divining who it was that was there. Inventing an errand for her companion which took that young lady out of the room for a few minutes, she hurried to the window and looked out. A tap from Tom, and the window was opened. Although surprised to see him, and at being so summoned, she frankly offered her hand.

"When you shall have heard my errand, Miss Culpepper, you will, I am sure, pardon the liberty I have taken," said Tom.

Her thoughts reverted in an instant to her

father, but he was snoring peacefully in the dining-room. "I hope, Mr. Bristow, that you are the bearer of no ill news," she said with simple earnestness.

"My news is either good or bad, as people may choose to take it," answered Tom. "Miss Culpepper—my friend, Lionel Dering, is hiding within a mile of this house."

"Oh, Mr. Bristow!" His words took her breath away. She turned giddy, and had to clutch at the window to keep herself from falling.

"The place where he has been hiding since his escape from prison is safe no longer," resumed Tom. "Another hiding-place must be found for him, and at once. In this great strait, I have ventured here to ask your assistance."

"And have made me your debtor for ever by so doing," said Jane, with fervour. "My help is yours in any way and in every way that you can make it useful."

"What I am here to ask you to do is, to give my friend food and shelter for three days

and nights, by which time a plan, now in preparation, for getting him away to some more distant place, will be ready to be put into operation."

"I will have my own rooms got ready for Mr. Dering without a moment's delay," said Jane.

"Pardon me," said Tom, "but the very kindness of your offer would defeat the object we have most in view. Dering's safety depends on the absolute secrecy which must enshroud this night's transactions. What you have just suggested could not be carried out without exciting the suspicions of one or more of your servants. From suspicion to inquiry is only one step, and from inquiry to discovery is often only another."

"You are right, Mr. Bristow. But you are not without a plan of your own, I am sure."

"What I would venture to suggest is this," said Tom: "that Dering be locked up in one or another of the disused and empty rooms of which I know there are several at Pincote.

No domestic must have access to the room while he is there, nor even glean the faintest suspicion that the room is occupied at all. The secret of the hiding-place must be your secret and mine absolutely. If I am asking too much, or more than you can see your way to carry out without imperilling the safety of my friend, you will tell me so frankly, I am sure, and will aid me in devising some other and more feasible mode of escape."

"You are not asking too much, Mr. Bristow. In such a case you cannot ask too much. Your plan is better than mine. This old house is big enough to hide half-a-dozen people away in. There is a suite of four rooms in the left wing, which rooms have never been used since mamma's death, and which are never entered by the servants except for cleaning purposes, and then only by my instructions. Those rooms I place unreservedly at Mr. Dering's disposal. There he will be perfectly safe for as long a time as he may choose to stay. I will wait on him myself. No one else shall go near him."

“I felt sure that my appeal to you would not be in vain.”

“It will make me happier than I can tell you, if I may be allowed to assist, in however humble a degree, in helping Mr. Dering to escape. We all liked him so much, and we were all so thoroughly convinced of his innocence, that when the news was brought next morning of how he had got out of gaol overnight, I could not help crying, I felt so glad; and I never saw papa so pleased and excited before. Since then, it has always been my task at luncheon to run carefully through the morning papers and see whether there was any news of Mr. Dering. From our hearts we wished him God speed wherever he might be; and as day passed after day, and there came no news of his recapture, we cheered each other with the hope that he had got safely away to some far-distant land. And yet all this time, from what you say, he must have been hiding close at hand.”

“Yes, very close at hand—within half a mile of the prison from which he escaped.”

“And it was you who helped him to escape!” said Jane. “I know now that it could have been no one but you.” She laid her fingers lightly on his arm as she said these words, and looked up full into his eyes. They both stood in the soft glow of the lamplight close to the open window. In Jane’s eyes and face at this moment there was an expression—an indefinable something, tender and yet pathetic—that thrilled Tom as he had never been thrilled before, and told him, in language which could not be mistaken, that he was loved.

“Lionel Dering and I are friends. He saved my life. What could I do less than try to save his?”

“I wish that I had been born a man,” said Jane, inconsequently, with a little sigh.

“In order that you might have gone about the world assisting prisoners to escape?”

“No—in order that I might try to win for myself such a friend as you are to Mr. Dering, or as Mr. Dering is to you.”

“But your mission is a sweeter one than

that of friendship: you were sent into the world to love."

"That is what men always say of women. But to me, friendship always seems so much purer and nobler than love. Love—as I have read and heard—is so selfish and exacting, and——"

"Jane, dear, where are you?"

Jane gave a start, and Tom sank back into the shade. "Coming, dear, in one moment," cried Jane. Then she whispered hurriedly to Tom: "Be here at half-past eleven to-night with Mr. Dering." She gave him her fingers for a moment and was gone.

For four days and four nights Lionel Dering lay in hiding at Pincote. Jane waited upon him herself, and so carefully was the secret kept that no one under that roof—inmate, guest, or servant—had the slightest suspicion of anything out of the ordinary course.

Meanwhile, Tom Bristow had paid a flying visit down into the wilds of Cumberland, among which, as incumbent of a tiny parish buried among the hills, was settled an old

chum of Lionel—George Granton by name. To him, at Lionel's request, Tom told everything, and then asked him whether he would take Dering as a guest under his roof for two or three months to come. In the warmest manner possible Granton agreed to do this, and Tom and he became fast friends on the spot.

Two days later Lionel bade farewell to Pin-cote and its youthful mistress, and set out on his journey to the north. Tom and he started together one evening near midnight, and walked across country to a little roadside station some fifteen miles away, on a line different from that which ran through Duxley. Here they were in time to catch the early parliamentary train, and here the two friends bade each other good-bye for a little while. Lionel travelled under the name of the Rev. Horace Brown, and that was the name on the one small portmanteau which formed his solitary article of luggage. He had injured his health by over-study, and he was going down into Cumberland to recruit. He was closely shaven, his complexion was dark, and his hair

jet black. Being somewhat weak-sighted, he wore a pair of large blue spectacles. His hat, far from new, and rather broad in the brim, was set well back on his head, giving him a simple countrified expression. He wore a white cravat, and a collar that was rather limp, and a long clerical coat that reached below his knees; while his black kid gloves were baggy and too long in the fingers. In one hand he carried an alpaca umbrella badly rolled up, and in the other—the weather being moist and muddy—a pair of huge goloshes, of which he seemed to take especial care. Such, in outward semblance, was the Rev. Horace Brown.

At Crewe Station he had to alight, wait a quarter of an hour, and then change into another train. As he was slowly pacing the platform, whom should he see coming towards him but Kester St. George, who, on his side, was waiting for the express to London. The two men passed each other once, and then again, for Lionel was daring in the matter; but not the slightest look of recog-

nition flashed into Kester's eyes as they rested for a moment on the face of the Rev. Horace Brown. A few minutes later their different trains came up, and each went his separate way.

Kester St. George's way was London-wards. He drove straight to his chambers; and, after dressing, strolled out westward, and presently found himself at his club. There were a number of men there whom he had not seen for some time, who came up to him in ones and twos and shook hands with him, and said, "How are you, old fellow? Glad to see you back;" or, "Ah, here you are, dear boy. Quite missed you for ever so long," and then passed on. Kester's monosyllabic answers were anything but propitiatory, and by-and-by he was left to eat his dinner in sulky solitude. Truth to say, he was fagged and worn, and was, in addition, seriously uneasy with regard to the state of his health. For the last two months he had been telling himself day after day that he would consult his physician, but he had not yet found courage to do so. It was an ordeal

from which he shrank as a young girl might shrink at the sight of blood. So long as he had not consulted his doctor, and did not know the worst, he flattered himself that there could not be anything very serious the matter with him. "Once get into those vampires' hands," he said, "and they will often keep a fellow lingering on for years." So he went on from day to day, and put off doing what he felt in his secret heart he ought to have done previously. "I believe it's neither more nor less than indigestion," he would mutter to himself. "I believe that half the ills that flesh is heir to, spring from nothing but indigestion."

He was sitting moodily over his claret, and the club-room was almost deserted, when who should come stepping daintily in but Bolus, the well-known fashionable doctor.

The evening was rather chilly, and Dr. Bolus walked up to the fire and began to air his palms, before sitting down to the evening paper. Glancing round, after a minute or two, he saw Kester sitting alone no great

distance away. "Evening, St. George. *Revenons toujours, eh ?*" he said with a nod and a smile.

St. George rose languidly and crossed towards the fireplace. "Why not tell Bolus?" he said to himself. "Capital opportunity for getting his opinion unprofessionally as between one friend and another. If anybody can put me on my pins again, Bolus can."

Between Kester St. George and the fashionable doctor there were not many points in common. Their orbits of motion were diametrically opposed to each other, and, as a rule, were far apart. One bond of sympathy there was, however, between them: they were both splendid whist-players. At the club table they had sat in opposition, or as partners, many a time and oft, and each respected the other's prowess, while thinking his own style of play incomparably superior.

"Not seen you here for some time," said the doctor, as Kester held out his hand.

"No, I only got back the other day from Baden and Homburg. Went for three

months, but came back at the end of six weeks. One gets weary of the perpetual glitter and frivolity of those places : at least, I do. Besides which, I was a little hipped—a little bit out of sorts, I suppose—and so I seemed naturally to gravitate towards home again.”

“ Out of sorts, eh ?” said Bolus, fixing him with his keen professional look. “ What’s amiss with you ? Been punting too much, or backed the St. Leger favourite too heavily ?” and he took St. George’s wrist between his thumb and finger.

“ Neither one nor the other,” said Kester, with a little hollow laugh. “ I seem to be getting out of repair generally. Some little cog or wheel inside won’t act properly, I suppose, and so the whole machine is getting out of gear.”

“ So long as we keep the mainspring right there’s not much to be afraid of,” said Bolus with his expansive professional smile, which was as stereotyped and fictitious as profes-

sional smiles, whether of ballet-girls or doctors, always are.

"Your pulse is certainly not what it ought to be," went on Bolus, in his airy, graceful way, as though he were imparting a piece of information of the pleasantest kind; "but then how seldom one's pulse is what it ought to be. Do you ever experience any little irregularity in the action of the heart?"

"Yes, frequently. Sometimes it seems to stop beating for a second or two."

"Yes—yes—just so," said Bolus, soothingly. "And you find yourself getting out of breath more quickly than you used to do, especially when you walk a little faster than ordinary, or have to climb a number of stairs?"

"Yes, a little thing nowadays puts me out of puff."

"Precisely so. We are none of us so young as we were twenty years ago. And you sometimes feel as if you wanted an extra pillow under your head at night?"

"How the deuce do you know that?" said Kester, with a puzzled look.

Bolus laughed his little dry laugh, and began to air his palms again.

"And you have a troublesome little cough, and now and then your head aches without your being able to assign a cause why it should do so; and frequently in the night you start up in your sleep from some feeling of agitation or alarm—causeless, of course, but very real just for the moment?"

"By Jove, doctor, you read me like a book!"

"Did you think of going down to Doncaster this year?" asked Bolus, as he wheeled suddenly round on Kester.

"I certainly did think of doing so. I've not missed a St. Leger for many years."

"Then I wouldn't go if I were you."

St. George stared at him with a sort of sullen surprise. "And why would you not go if you were me?" he asked, sharply.

"Simply because what you want is not excitement, but rest. And in your case, St. George, I would live as quiet a life as possible

for some time to come. Down in the country, you know—farming and that sort of thing.”

“I know nothing of farming, and I hate the country, except during the shooting season.”

“Ah, by-the-by, that’s another thing you must give up—tramping after the partridges—for this one season at least. As I said before, what you want is quietude. Half a guinea on the odd trick is the only form of excitement on which you may venture for some time to come. And harkye—a word in your ear: not quite so many club cigars, my dear friend.”


Two other men, known both to Bolus and St. George, came up at this moment, and the tête-à-tête was at an end.

It was late that night when St. George got home. He let himself in with his latch-key. Groping his way into the sitting-room, he struck a match, and turned on the gas. He was in the act of blowing out the match when suddenly a hand was laid on his shoulder, and a voice whispered in his ear: “*Come.*” Simply that one word, and nothing more. Kester

shivered from head to foot, and glanced involuntarily round. He knew that he should see no one—that there was no one to be seen : but all the same he could not help looking. Twice before he had felt the same ghostly hand laid on his shoulder : twice before he had heard the same ghostly whisper in his ear. Was it a summons from the other world, or what was it ? There was a looking-glass on the chimney-piece, and, as he staggered forward a step or two, his eyes, glancing into it, saw there the reflection of a white and haggard face strangely unlike his own—the brow moist with sweat, the eyes filled with a furtive horror. Mr. St. George sank into a chair and buried his face in his hands.

CHAPTER VII.

GENERAL ST. GEORGE.

ENERAL ST. GEORGE'S departure from India had been accelerated by a slight attack of fever, which so far prostrated him that he was unable to write, or communicate in any way to his friends in England the fact that he was starting for home two months before the date previously fixed on by himself. As a consequence, the letters and newspapers addressed to him, which contained the account of his nephew Lionel Dering's arrest and commitment for wilful murder, crossed him on the voyage, and he landed at Marseilles in happy ignorance of the whole affair.

His health had benefited greatly by the

voyage, and he determined to strengthen it still further by lingering for a few weeks in the South of France before venturing to encounter the more variable and trying climate of his own country. It was while thus enjoying himself that the letters and papers sent back from India reached him. It was a terrible shock to the old soldier to read the news told therein. In his secret heart he had come to look upon Lionel with all the affection and yearning which he might have bestowed on a son.

Without the loss of a moment he started for Paris, en route for London.

But by the time he reached Paris he was so ill again that the doctor whom he called in ordered him at once to bed, and utterly forbade him even to think of venturing any farther on his journey for at least a fortnight to come. In this dilemma he telegraphed to Mr. Perrins, the family lawyer. That gentleman was by the old soldier's bedside in less than twenty-four hours afterwards.

Mr. Perrins brought with him the startling

news of Lionel's escape from prison ; but beyond the bare facts of the affair as detailed in the newspapers he knew nothing. With those bare facts the General was obliged to content himself for some time to come. He watched the newspapers from day to day with feverish anxiety, dreading each morning to find in them the news of Lionel's recapture. But when a month had passed away, and the subject had begun to die out of people's minds in the rush of newer interests, he took heart of grace and wrote to Perrins again, begging of him to go down to Duxley, and there ascertain, by cautious inquiries and the free use of his purse, whether it were not possible to obtain some clue, however faint, to Lionel's whereabouts.

Mr. Hoskyns was the first person on whom Mr. Perrins called when he found himself at Duxley ; but that gentleman professed to know very little more than was known to the public at large. Nor, in fact, did he. The annoyance he had felt at the time at having been so cleverly impersonated, and the trouble

he had been put to to prove his non-complicity in the escapade, had soon been forgotten. He had learned to like and esteem Lionel as much as it was possible for him to like and esteem any one, and he was genuinely glad that he had escaped from prison. But it was no part of his business to pry into the details of the affair, nor did he ever attempt to do so; neither did Lionel nor Tom see any adequate motive for laying on his shoulders the burden of a secret which he could in no-wise help to lighten for them.

Thus it fell out that he had nothing to tell Perrins. But he did the wisest thing that could be done under the circumstances: he took him straight to Tom Bristow, introduced him to that gentleman, and then left the two together.

This first interview between Mr. Perrins and Tom took place during the time that Lionel was lying perdu at Pincote. Not till he had fully satisfied himself as to the lawyer's identity, and had consulted with Lionel, would Tom say a word either one way or

another. So Mr. Perrins stayed all night in Duxley, and saw Tom the following morning; but, even then, the information which he took back with him for the behoof of General St. George was of the scantiest. Still, as far as it went, it was eminently satisfactory. Lionel was well and safe. He sent his love and regards to his uncle, and begged of him to wait a little while longer and then everything should be told him.

The General had not long to wait. Within a fortnight of the time that Mr. Perrins had communicated to him the result of his mission, Mr. Tom Bristow was ushered into the sitting-room of his hotel in Paris. Tom was the bearer of a letter of introduction from Lionel, which spoke of him and his services in such terms that the old soldier's heart warmed to him in a moment. Then Tom told him everything: the story of the murder; the imprisonment; the marriage; the trial and the escape; and finished by telling him how Lionel, under the name of the Rev. Horace

Brown, was at that moment hidden safely away among the Cumberland hills.

The old soldier listened to the narrative in open-mouthed wonder. To him it was like a story out of the "Arabian Nights"—a veritable chapter of romance.

He thanked Tom Bristow over and over again, in his warm-hearted, impulsive way, for the services he had rendered his dear boy.

"But we have now to consider the future," said Tom, when he had brought his narrative up to date.

"Ay; just so. But what about the future?" asked General St. George, with a puzzled look.

"Simply this," answered Tom. "As matters stand at present, Dering's life is one of perpetual dread and uncertainty. He never feels sure from day to day that before night-fall his hiding-place may not be discovered, or his disguise penetrated, and he himself taken into custody as an escaped murderer. Such a life, in time, would become utterly unbearable—would, in fact, be enough to drive a man in-

sane, or to give himself up to the police in utter despair."

"I see it all. Poor boy! poor boy!"

"It would, therefore, seem that in order to escape so wretched a fate, only one course is left open to Dering: and that is, to put the width of the ocean between himself and his pursuers. The width of half a world if possible."

"I should go with him wherever he went," said the General, with a tear in the corner of his eye. "I could not bear to let him go again."

"In some remote nook of the New World, where the nearest city is a hundred miles away, with his wife on one hand and you on the other, to love and care for him, Lionel Dering, like a storm-tossed ship that has reached a happy haven at last, might live out the remainder of his days in quiet happiness; without any haunting dread that his past life would ever become known, or that he would ever be touched on the shoulder by any other hand than that of a friend."

“Yes—yes; living out in the bush, or something of that kind is what you mean,” said the old soldier, excitedly. “I’ve camped out in the jungle many a time, and know what it is. It’s not such a bad sort of life when you get used to it. Why not get Li to sail next week? I’m an old campaigner, and could have my rattletraps ready in a few hours.”

“But to go away thus,” resumed Tom, “with the red stain of murder clinging to his name; with the foul conspiracy to destroy him still unravelled; with his wrongs unavenged; is what Lionel Dering will never consent to do. And I confess that, were I in his place, my feelings in the matter would be very similar to his. He has set before himself one great object in life, and he will never rest till he has accomplished it. And that is—to track out and bring to punishment the real murderer of Percy Osmond.”

“But—but what can he do?” faltered the General. “It seems to me that his predicament is such that he is quite powerless to help

himself, or to take any action whatever in his own interests."

"At the first glance it would naturally seem so," said Tom. "But some of the difficulties which surround his case, as it stands at present, may, perhaps, be got over by a little ingenuity. I am going to put before you a certain scheme which may, or may not, meet with your approbation. Should you not approve of it, it will have to be at once abandoned, as it will be impossible to carry it out without your active help and co-operation."

"My dear Mr. Bristow, you have told me enough this morning to induce me to promise beforehand that any scheme you may put before me, which has for its basis the welfare of Lionel, will meet with my heartiest support. No man could have proved himself a better friend to my dear boy than you have done. Your wishes are my law."

After satisfying himself that there were no eavesdroppers about, Tom proceeded to lay before General St. George the details of a scheme which he had been elaborating in his

brain for several days, and which, in outline, had been already agreed to by Lionel.

When Tom ceased speaking, the old soldier mopped his forehead with his handkerchief. He was hot and nervous with excitement. "Your scheme is certainly a most extraordinary one," he said; "but I have faith in your ability to carry it out. I need hardly say that you may depend upon my doing my best in every way to second your designs."

Tom stayed and dined with the General, and went back to London by the night mail.

One result of the interview was that the General decided on not returning to England for some time to come. Lionel and his wife were to join him in a little while at some place on the Continent, not yet fixed upon. Meantime he would rest quietly in Paris, and there await further instructions from Tom.

The General had obtained Kester St. George's address from Mr. Perrins, and about a week after Tom's visit he wrote to his nephew, telling him where he was, and asking him to go over and see him in Paris. The in-

vation was one which Kester obeyed with alacrity. He had always held firmly to the belief that his uncle was a comparatively rich man. Now that Lionel was out of the way, and with so terrible an accusation still hanging over him, what more natural or likely than that he should replace Lionel in his uncle's affections ; and have his own name substituted in place of that of his cousin in his uncle's will ?

Kester flung black care to the winds as he climbed the staircase that led to his uncle's apartments in Paris. He put on his most winning smile, his most genial manner, as another man might pull on a pair of easy-fitting gloves. A servant opened the door : and there was his uncle seated in an invalid chair at the far end of the room.

Kester sprang forward. "My dear uncle——" he began ; and then he stopped. There was something in the eyes of the old soldier that chilled his enthusiasm in a moment.

The General extended two lean, frigid fin-

gers, and motioned to him to sit down. "Pray be seated," he said. "I am not well, and I hate scenes." Kester sat down without a word.

General St. George, after deliberately rubbing his spectacles with his handkerchief, placed them across his nose, and proceeded to take a steady survey of his nephew.

Kester fidgeted a little under the ordeal, but smiled and tried to appear pleased.

"You don't look so young as when I saw you last," said his uncle.

"Eight years make a difference in the appearance of most men," said Kester; "and London life is very wearing."

"No doubt it is," said the veteran, drily. "But that any absolute necessity exists for you to live in London is more than I was aware of before."

"No absolute necessity, perhaps, does exist. Yet I confess that, except by way of a brief change now and again, life to me anywhere else would soon become unendurable."

“You look prematurely old, sir—prematurely old,” said the General, severely. His spectacles were across his nose again by this time, and he was again looking Kester steadily in the face. And now he spoke in a voice that was low, stern, and impressive. “You look as if you had a burden on your mind: you look as if you had some secret care that was eating away your very life. Kester St. George, you are an unhappy man!”

Kester’s colour came and went. A shiver ran through him from head to foot. He pressed one hand for a moment across his eyes. Then he laughed, a forced, hollow laugh.

“Really, sir, you are rather hard on me,” he said. “After not seeing you for eight years, this is scarcely the greeting I anticipated from you. You have called me an unhappy man. Granting that I am one, am I any exception to the ordinary run of my fellow mortals? Show me the man who is really happy—who has no skeleton locked up in the secret closet of his heart!”

“Kester St. George, what have you done with your cousin, Lionel Dering?”

Kester started to his feet, his eyes staring, his hands trembling. A spasm that was gone almost before it had come, contorted his face for a moment strangely.

“Before heaven, General St. George, I don’t know what you are driving at!” he cried, in tones that were husky from excitement. “I am not my cousin’s keeper, that you should ask me what I have done with him.”

“Then it was not you who assisted him to escape from prison?”

“I! No—certainly not.”

“And yet I said it could be no one but you,” said the General, half sadly. “And you don’t know what has become of him? You cannot tell me where to find him now?”

“I have no more knowledge of my cousin’s whereabouts than you have, sir.”

“How I have been mistaken! When I read the account of Lionel’s extraordinary escape, I said to myself, ‘This is Kester’s

doing. Kester knew that his cousin was innocent, and it is he who has helped him to escape.' ”

“ You honoured me in your thoughts far more highly than I deserved. I stated all along my belief in my cousin's innocence, but I had certainly no hand in planning his escape.”

“ But, at all events, you saw him frequently while he was in prison? You were there as his friend, helper, and adviser? How did he bear his imprisonment? Did he speak of me?”

Again Kester's colour came and went. “ I never saw my cousin while he was in prison,” he said, in a low voice. “ I was suffering severely from illness during the whole time. I was confined to my own rooms, and forbidden to stir out of doors on any account.”

“ You were well enough, sir, to find your way to your club within a week of the date of your cousin's trial. You were not too ill to play whist with Colonel Lexington, and win fifty guineas from that gentleman by

betting on the odd trick. You were not afraid of walking home afterwards through the cold streets with a cigar in your mouth." All this had been told General St. George by Colonel Lexington himself—an old military friend, who had called upon him two or three days previously.

Kester St. George glared at his uncle as if he would gladly have annihilated him. But the old soldier gave him back look for look, and the younger man's eyes quickly fell. With a muttered curse, he pushed aside his chair, and strode to the window. Then he turned.

"General St. George, I will be frank with you," he said. "There was never any love lost between Lionel Dering and myself. However deeply shocked I might be that such a foul crime should be laid to his charge, however strong might be my belief in his innocence, I could not—no, I could not—go near him when he lay in prison. He wanted no help or advice from me. He would not have thanked me for proffering them. I would not play the hypocrite's part, and I did not go near him."

“Your candour is really refreshing,” answered the General. “Since you have no tidings to give me of my nephew, I am sorry to have brought you so far from home. If you will accept this little cheque in payment of your expenses, I shall esteem it a favour.”

Kester came a step or two nearer and held out his hands appealingly. “Uncle—are we to part in this way?” he said, not without a ring of pathos in his voice.

“And why should we not part in this way, Mr. St. George?”

“I know, sir, that I was never a favourite with you,” answered Kester, bitterly. “I know that I can never hope to stand as high in your regards as my cousin Lionel stood; but I did not know till this moment that I should ever be insulted by an offer such as the one you have just made me. I did not know till now that I should be dismissed like the veriest stranger that ever crossed your threshold!”

Not a muscle of General St. George’s face stirred in answer to this appeal: the hard,

cold light in his eyes never wavered for a moment. He distrusted his nephew thoroughly, and he dealt with him as he would have dealt with a wily Asiatic.

“If you feel that my offer of a cheque is an insult,” he said, “I retract the insult by replacing the cheque in my pocket. As regards treating you like a stranger, I have no intention of doing that, although I might just remind you that you and I are, in fact, very little more than strangers to each other. Still, I do not forget that you are my nephew. I asked you to come and see me, in the expectation that you would be able to give me some tidings of Lionel Dering, just as I should have sent for Lionel Dering in the expectation that he would have been able to give me some tidings of you, had your position and his been reversed. You have not been able to give me the news I wanted, why then need I detain you here? Are you anxious to become a hanger-on to a querulous invalid? No, Kester St. George, that is not the kind of life that would suit you—or me

either. Stay in Paris or go back to London, as may please you best. When I want you again, I will send for you. Meanwhile you may rest fully assured that I shall not forget you."

"I suppose it must be as you wish, sir," said Kester, humbly. "May I ask whether it is your intention to make any very long stay in Paris?"

"If my strength increases as it has done during the last few days, I shall not stay here more than another fortnight at the most."

"When we get you back again in England, sir, I trust there will be no objection to my calling on you rather oftener than I shall be able to do while you stay abroad."

"My doctor tells me that I must not think of crossing the Channel before next summer. I shall winter either in the south of France or in Italy. Probably in the latter, if I can find a place to suit me. I shall not be alone. Richard Dering, Lionel's brother, is ordered to Europe for his health, and will join me through

the winter. He has been with me in India, and understands my crotchety ways and queer temper."

Not without a bitter pang did Kester St. George hear this announcement. Hardly was one brother disposed of when another sprang up in his place. But he hid his disappointment under an admirable assumption of mingled affection and respect.

"At least, sir, there can be no objection to my having your address," he said, "when you are finally settled for the winter."

"None whatever—none whatever," answered the General.

"And should my vagrant footsteps lead me anywhere into your neighbourhood—although I don't think it at all likely that they will do so—and should I chance to drop in upon you about luncheon-time, I presume I should not be looked upon as an intruder?"

"Certainly not as an intruder. In fact, it was my intention to send for you before long, and ask you to stay with me. But not while my health is so bad. At present I am too


nervous and out of sorts for company of any kind." This was said with more kindness of tone than the General had yet used in speaking to his nephew, but at the same time it was a plain intimation that their interview was at an end. Kester rose at once, and took his leave.

"That fellow's an arrant scamp, although he is my nephew," muttered the General to himself, as the door closed behind Kester. "He's no real St. George. There's a drop of sinister blood somewhere in his veins that has proved foul enough to poison the whole. Of course, I knew when I sent for him that he had nothing to tell me about Lionel, but I wanted to see him and talk with him. I wanted to ascertain whether the impression that I formed of him when I was in England several years ago would be borne out by the impression I should form of him now. It has been borne out most fully. The Kester St. George of to-day, with his scheming brain and shallow heart, is precisely the Kester St. George of ten years ago, only with more ex-

perience and knowledge of the world's hard ways. Could we but wring the truth out of that crafty heart of his, I wonder whether one would find there the secret of a certain terrible crime? But I have no right to accuse him even in thought ; and Heaven, in its own good time, will surely bring the truth to light."

CHAPTER VIII.

CUPID AT PINCOTE.

ITH the departure of Lionel Dering from Pincote in disguise, and the subsequent removal of Edith and Mrs. Garside to London, it would naturally have been thought that Mr. Tom Bristow's business in Duxley was at an end, that he would have bidden the quiet little country town a long farewell, and have hastened back gladly to the busier haunts of men. But such was not the case. He still kept on his lodgings in Duxley. Although he had given notice to leave them three or four times, when the day came for him to go he had always renewed his tenancy for another short term; and he still lingered on in a vague,

purposeless sort of way, altogether unusual in one who rather prided himself on his decisive and business-like mode of conducting the affairs of his every-day life.

Truth to tell, he could not make up his mind to sever the thread of connection which bound him to Miss Culpepper; which, frail though it might be, still continued to hold together; and would, in all probability, so hold as long as he chose to remain at Duxley, but which must inevitably be broken for ever the moment he and his portmanteau bade a final farewell to the pleasant little town. And yet, what folly, what wild infatuation, it was! as he said to himself a score of times a day. There was not the remotest prospect of his being able to win Jane Culpepper for his wife—at least, not during the lifetime of her father. He had read his own heart and feelings by this time, and he knew that he loved her. He knew that he, the cool, calculating man of business, the shrewd speculator, who had never been overmuch inclined to believe in the romance of love; who had often de-

clared that if he ever were to marry it would be for money and money only ; he who had walked unscathed under the flashing fire of a thousand feminine eyes, had succumbed at last, like the most weak-minded of mortals, to the charms of a country-bred squire's daughter, who was neither very beautiful, very wise, very witty, nor, as he believed, very rich.

Yes, he certainly loved her. He owned that to himself now. He knew, too, that he couldn't help himself, and that, however foolish his passion might be, he could not bear to break himself away from it entirely, as he ought to have done, and put two hundred miles of distance between himself and her. He preferred to still linger on in love's pleasant paradise. Not with his own hands would he consent to shut the golden gates that would bar him for ever from that sunny precinct.

That Miss Culpepper was engaged to young Cope he knew quite well. But Tom Bristow was not a man to set much store by such an

engagement. He felt, instinctively as it were, that Jane had drifted into her present position almost unconsciously and without being sure of her own feelings in the matter. That Edward Cope was quite unworthy of being her husband he had no manner of doubt: who, indeed, was worthy of holding that position? Not much less doubt had he as to the real state of Jane's feelings toward the banker's son; and holding, as he did, that all is fair in love and war, he would have seen Mr. Edward Cope jilted, and he himself installed in his place, without the slightest feeling of compunction.

"He's an unmitigated cad," said Tom to himself. "He's altogether incapable of appreciating a girl like Jane." This, reversing the point of view, was exactly Edward Cope's own opinion. In his belief it was he who was the unappreciated one.

But a far more serious impediment than any offered by Jane's engagement to young Cope lay before Tom, like a rock ahead from which there was no escape. He knew quite

well that unless some special miracle should be worked in his behalf, it was altogether hopeless to expect that the Squire would ever consent to a marriage between himself and Jane ; and that any special miracle would be so worked he had very little faith indeed. He knew how full of prejudices the Squire was ; and, notwithstanding his bonhomie and rough frankness of manner, how securely wrapped round he was with the trammels of caste. He knew, too, that had the Squire not owed his life in years gone by to Mr. Cope's bravery, from which act had sprung their warm friendship of many years, not even to the son of a rich banker would Titus Culpepper, the proud commoner, who could trace back his family for ten hundred years, have ever consented to give his daughter. While as for himself, he, Tom Bristow, however rich he might one day perhaps become, would never be anything more in Mr. Culpepper's eyes than the son of a poor country doctor, and, consequently, to a man of old family, a mere nobody—a person who by no

stretch of imagination could ever be looked upon in the light of a family connection.

And yet, being in possession of all this bitter knowledge, Tom Bristow made no really determined effort to break away, and to try the cure which is said to be often wrought by time and absence even in cases as desperate as his. Metaphorically speaking, he hugged the shackles that bound him, and gloried in the loss of his freedom : a very sad condition, indeed, for any reasonable being to fall into.

It was curious what a number of opportunities Tom and Jane seemed to find for seeing each other, and how often they found themselves together, quite fortuitously as it were, and without any apparent volition of their own in the matter. Sometimes Tom would be mooning about the High Street in the middle of the forenoon at the very time that the Pincote pony-carriage drew up against one or another of the shops, and then what more natural than that Jane and he should have three minutes' conversation together on the pavement ? Sometimes Jane would walk

into Merton's library at the very moment that Tom was critically choosing a novel which, when borrowed, he would carefully omit to read. How quickly half an hour—nay an hour—would pass at such times, and that in conversation of the most commonplace kind!

Sometimes Jane, wandering absently with a book in her hands, through the Pincote woods and meadows, would find herself, after a time, on the banks of the carefully preserved stream—river it could hardly be called—which wandered at its own sweet will through Squire Culpepper's demesne. There, strange to relate, she would find Mr. Bristow whipping the stream; very inartistically it must be admitted; but trying his best to make believe that he was a very skilful angler indeed.

What wings the sunny minutes put themselves on at such times! How quickly the yellow afternoons faded and waned, and Jane would look round at last, quite startled to find that twilight had come already. Then Tom would accompany her part of the way

back towards the house, his fishing-basket empty indeed, but his heart overbrimming with the happiness of perfect love.

Once every now and again the Squire, meeting Tom casually in the street, would ask him to dinner at Pincote. Memorable occasions those, never to be forgotten either by Tom or Jane, when, with the drawing-room all to themselves, while the Squire snoozed for an hour in his easy-chair in the dining-room, they could sit and talk, or pretend to play chess, or make believe to be deeply interested in some portfolio of engravings, or to be altogether immersed in a selection from the last new opera, turning over the leaves and strumming a few bars experimentally here and there ; while, in reality, rapt up in and caring for nothing and nobody but themselves.

Yet never once was a single word of love whispered between them, whatever mutual tales their eyes might tell. Jane still held herself as engaged to Edward Cope ; but she had made up her mind that as soon as that young gentleman should return from America

she would see him, and tell him that she had discovered her error—that she no longer cared for him as a woman ought to care for the man she is about to marry; and she would appeal to his generosity to relieve her from an engagement that had now become utterly distasteful to her. His letters from abroad were so infrequent, so brief, and so utterly unlover-like, that she did not anticipate much difficulty in obtaining her request. But, as she was well aware, there was a certain amount of mule-like obstinacy in the character of Edward Cope, and it was quite possible that when he found she no longer cared for him, he might cling to her all the more firmly. What if he should refuse to release her? The contemplation of such a possibility was not a pleasant one. What she should do in such a case she could not even imagine. But it would be time enough to think of that when the necessity for thinking of it should have arisen.

But even if released from her engagement to Edward Cope, Jane knew that she would still be as far as ever from the haven of her

secret hopes, and that without running entirely counter to her father's wishes and prejudices, the haven in question could never be reached by her. But although it might never be possible for her to marry the man whom she secretly loved, she was fully determined in her own mind never to marry any one else, however strongly the world might consider her to be bound by the fetters of her odious engagement. Edward Cope, although he might refuse to release her from her promise, should never force her into becoming his wife.

The fact of having been appealed to by Tom Bristow to find a shelter for his friend, when that friend was in dire trouble, seemed to draw him closer to Janethan anything else. From that hour her feelings towards him took a warmer tinge than they had ever assumed before. There was something almost heroic in her eyes in the friendship between Lionel and Tom, and that she should have been called upon to assist, in however humble a way, in the escape of the former was to her a proof of confidence such as she could never possibly forget. She never

met Tom without inquiring for the last news as to the movements of Lionel and his wife ; and Tom, on his side, took care to keep her duly posted up in everything that concerned them. A week or so after the departure of Lionel for Cumberland, Jane had been taken by Tom to Alder Cottage and introduced to Edith. How warmly the latter thanked her for what she had done need not be told here. In that hour of their meeting was laid the foundation of one of those friendships, rare between two women, which death alone has power to sever.

However deeply Mr. Tom Bristow might be in love, however infatuated he might be on one particular point, he in nowise neglected his ordinary business avocations, nor did he by any means spend the whole of his time in Duxley and its neighbourhood. He was frequently in London ; nor was either Liverpool or Manchester unacquainted with his face, for Tom's speculative proclivities expended themselves in many and various channels. The project to bring Duxley, by means of a branch

railway from one of the great trunk lines, into closer connection with some of the chief centres of industry in that part of the country, was one which had always engaged his warmest sympathies. But the project, after having been safely incubated, and launched in glowing terms before the public, had been quietly allowed to collapse, its promoters having taken alarm at certain formidable engineering difficulties which had not presented themselves during the preliminary survey of the route.


This put Tom Bristow on his mettle. He had been familiar from boyhood with the country for twenty miles round Duxley, and he felt sure that a much more favourable route than the one just abandoned might readily be found if properly looked for. Taking a practical surveyor with him, and the ordnance map of the district, Tom went carefully over the ground in person, trudging mile after mile on foot, in all sorts of weather, seeing his way after a time, little by little, to the elaboration of a project much bolder in idea and wider in scope than any which had ever entered the thoughts of the original projectors.

A month later Tom found himself closeted with the heads of a certain well-known financial firm, who were celebrated for their far-seeing views and their boldness in floating large schemes of public importance. With this firm was also mixed up another well-known firm of eminent engineers and contractors: but how and in what way they were mixed up, and where one firm began and the other ended, was more than any outside person could ever ascertain, and was popularly supposed to be a mythical point even with the parties chiefly concerned. But be that as it may, Tom Bristow's scheme met with a very favourable reception both from a financial and an engineering point of view. While still kept a profound secret from the public at large, its details were laid before some five or six well-known members of the House, whose opinions carried much weight in such matters and were a tolerably safe criterion as to whether any particular bill would be likely to pass unslaughtered through the terrible ordeal of Committee. So favour-

able were the opinions thus asked for, that Mr. Bristow went at once to a certain metropolitan land agent, and instructed him to buy up and hold over for him certain fields and plots of land, which happened to be for sale just then at different points exactly on or contiguous to the proposed line of railway. Such property would rise immensely in value from the moment the prospectus of the line was made public, and by the time the first sod was turned Tom calculated that he ought to be in a position to clear cent. per cent. by his bold speculation.

CHAPTER IX.

AT THE VILLA PAMPHILI.

HE month of October had half run its course, the Continental Meccas were nearly deserted, the pilgrims were returning in shoals day by day, and the London club-houses were no longer the temples of desolation that they had been for the last two months.

In the smoke-room of his club, in the easiest of easy-chairs, sat Kester St. George, cigar in mouth, his hat tilted over his eyes, musing bitterly over the hopes, follies, and prospects of his broken life. And his life was, in truth, a broken one. With what fair prospects had he started from port, and now, at thirty-three years of age, to what a bankrupt

ending he had come! One way or another he had contrived until now to surmount his difficulties, or, at least, to tide them over for the time being; but, at last, the net seemed to be finally closing around him. Of ready money he had next to none. His credit was at an end. Tailor, bootmaker, and glover had alike shut their doors in his face. A three months' bill for two hundred and fifty pounds would fall due in about a week's time, and he had absolutely no assets with which to meet it; nor was there the remotest possibility of his being able to obtain a renewal of it. He had made sure of winning heavily on certain races, but the horses he had backed had invariably come to grief; and it was only by making a desperate effort that he had been able to meet his engagements and save his credit on the turf. When he should have pawned or sold his watch and the few rings and trinkets that still remained to him, and should have spent the few pounds realized thereby, beggary, the most complete and absolute, would stare him in the face. But two courses were left open

for him : flight and outlawry, or an appeal to the generosity of his uncle, General St. George. Bitter alternatives both. Besides which it was by no means certain that his uncle would respond to any such appeal, and he shrank unaccountably, he could hardly have told himself why, from the task of asking relief of the stern old soldier. He questioned himself again and again whether suicide would not be far preferable to the pauper's life, which was all that he now saw before him—whether it would not be better, by one bold stroke, to cut at once and for ever through the tangled web of difficulties that bound him. Over his dead body the men to whom he owed money might wrangle as much as they chose : a comfortable nook in the family vault would doubtless be found for him, and beyond that he would need nothing more. Unspeakably bitter to-night were the musings of Kester St. George.

“A bullet through the brain, or a dose of prussic acid—which shall it be?” he asked himself. “It matters little which. They are

both speedy, and both sure. Then the voice will whisper in my ear in vain : then I shall no longer feel the hand laid on my shoulder : then the black shadow that broods over my life will be swallowed up for ever in the blacker shadows of death !”

Suddenly a waiter glided up to him, salver in hand. On the salver lay a telegram. “If you please, sir,” said the man, in his most deferential voice. Mr. St. George started, looked up, and took the telegram mechanically.

For full two minutes he held it between his thumb and finger without opening it. “Why need I trouble myself with what it contains ?” he muttered. “One more stroke of ill-fortune can matter nothing, and I’m past all hope of any good fortune. To a man who is being stoned to death one stone the more is not worth complaining about. Perhaps it’s to tell me that Aurora has fallen lame or dead. Serve the jade right ! I backed her for two thousand at Doncaster, and lost. Perhaps it’s only one of Dimmock’s ‘straight tips,’

imploing me to invest a 'little spare cash' on some mysterious favourite that is sure to be scratched before the race comes off. Never again, O Mentor, shall thy fingers touch gold of mine! All the spare cash I have will be needed to pay for my winding-sheet."

With a sneer, he flicked open the envelope that held the telegram, opened the paper, and read the one line that was written therein.

"Lionel Dering is dead. Come here at once!"

The telegram dropped from his fingers—the cigar fell from his lips. A strange, death-like pallor overspread his face. He pressed both his hands to his left side, and sank back in his chair like a man suddenly stricken by some invisible foe.

The waiter, who had been hovering near, was by his side in a moment. "Are you ill, sir?" he said. "What can I get you? Would you like a glass of water?"

Mr. St. George did not answer in words, but his eyes said Yes. With a deep gasp, that was half a sob, he seemed to recover

himself. His hands dropped from his breast, and the colour began to come slowly back into his face. He drank the water, thanked the man, and was left alone to realize the intelligence he had just received.

Lionel Dering dead! Impossible! Such news could only be the lying invention of some juggling fiend whose object it was to give him, for one brief moment, a glimpse of Paradise, and then cast him headlong into still deeper caverns of despair than any in which his soul had ever lost itself before.

Lionel Dering dead! What did not such news mean to him—if only—if only it were true! It was like a reprieve at the last moment to some poor wretch condemned to die. The news is whispered in his ear, the cords are unloosened, he stares round like a man suddenly roused from some hideous nightmare, and cannot, for a little time, believe that the blissful words he has just heard are really true. So it was with St. George. His brain was in a maze—his mind in a whirl. Again

and again he repeated to himself, "It cannot be true!"

Then he did what, under ordinary circumstances, he would have done at first—he picked up the telegram in order to ascertain whence it came, and by whom it had been sent; two points which he had altogether overlooked up to now, his eyes having been first caught by the one significant line of message. The telegram trembled in his fingers like an aspen leaf, as he turned it to the light, and read these words—"From General St. George, Villa Pamphili, near Como, Italy, to Kester St. George, 34, Great Carrington Street, London, England." And then once more his eyes took in the brief, pregnant message, "Lionel Dering is dead. Come here at once."

It was all true, then—all blissfully true—and not a wild hallucination of his own disordered mind! Still he seemed as though he could not possibly realize it. He glanced round. No one was regarding him. He pressed the telegram to his lips twice, pas-

sionately. Then he folded it up carefully and accurately, and put it away in the breast-pocket of his frock-coat. Then, pulling his hat over his brow, and burying his hands deep in his pockets, he lounged slowly out of the club, greeting no one, looking neither to the right hand nor to the left; and so, going slowly through the streets with eyes fixed straight before him, he at length reached his rooms in Great Carrington Street.

Twenty minutes sufficed for the packing of his portmanteau. Kester St. George was his own valet now. He had been obliged to dispense with the services of Pierre Janvard months ago, having no longer the means of keeping him. When his portmanteau was locked and strapped, he scribbled on a piece of paper, "Shall not be back for a week," affixed the paper outside his door, took a last glance round, pulled-to the door, carried his luggage downstairs, hailed the first empty hansom that passed him, and was driven to the terminus at London Bridge. But before reaching the station, he stopped the cab at a

tavern kept by a sporting publican to whom he was well known. From this man he obtained a loan of thirty pounds on his watch and chain and diamond pin. After drinking one small cup of black coffee and cognac, he paced the flags of the station till the train was ready, smoking one strong cigar after another, and seeing and heeding nothing of the busy scene around him.

And so, still like a man in a dream, he started on his journey. He changed mechanically from railway to steamer, and from steamer to railway; he dozed, he smoked, he drank coffee and cognac; he waited for a train here and a conveyance there, but otherwise he did not break the continuity of his journey; and, at last, he found himself by the shore at Como, inquiring his way to the Villa Pamphili.

He was still like a man in a dream. That sense of unreality with which he had started on his journey still clung to him. Not even when he saw the white walls of the villa glimmering in the moonlight, not even when

he stood for a moment with his uncle's hand clasped in his, could he quite believe in the actuality of what he saw around him. But he was thoroughly worn out by this time, and by common consent all conversation was deferred till the morrow. Ten hours of unbroken sleep made Kester St. George feel like another man.

Rapidly as Kester had performed his journey, there were two individuals who had reached the scene before him. They were Mr. Drayton, the Duxley superintendent of police, and Mr. Whiffins, the detective officer from Scotland Yard. General St. George, acting under the advice of Tom Bristow, had telegraphed to the police authorities the fact of Lionel's death at the same time that he had communicated with Kester. But there had been some delay in the transmission of the message to the latter; as a consequence of which the two officers had reached the villa some five or six hours before Kester's arrival. The object of their journey was purely for the purpose of identification. They

were there to satisfy themselves and their superiors that Lionel Dering, and no one but he, was really dead. Of the presence of Tom Bristow in the villa neither they nor Kester had any knowledge whatever, nor was he once seen by any of the three while they were there.

As Kester was dressing in the morning, his eye was caught by the figure of a man who was lounging slowly through the winding garden paths, plucking a flower here and there as he went. He gave a great start of surprise and his face blanched for a moment when his eyes first rested on the man. At that instant Hewitt, General St. George's valet, came in with Kester's hot water for shaving. "Who is that?" said Mr. St. George sharply, as he pointed to the figure in the garden.

"That gentleman, sir, is Mr. Richard Dering, a younger brother of the late Mr. Lionel," answered Hewitt.

"And how long has he been here?"

“He arrived here from India eight days ago.”

“In time to see his brother alive?”

“Oh, yes, sir. It is only five days since Mr. Lionel died.”

“Was Mr. Richard with his brother when he died?”

“I believe so, sir. But not being there myself, I cannot say for certain. Mr. Richard has come from India for the benefit of his health. We had been expecting him nearly two months before he came.”

“I suppose this fellow will step into his brother’s shoes and inherit the few thousands my uncle will have to leave when he dies,” muttered Kester to himself when Hewitt had left the room. “But what does that matter to me now—to me, the owner of Park Newton and eleven thousand a year?”

It was with a sense of dignity and importance such as he had never experienced before, that Kester St. George walked downstairs that morning to his uncle’s breakfast-room. He felt himself to be a very different individual, both in his

own estimation and in that of the world, from the despairing, impecunious wretch who, but a few short hours before, was sitting in the smoke-room of his club, deliberating as to the easiest mode of bidding farewell to a world in whose economy there no longer seemed to be a place for him.

As he walked downstairs he could not help thinking that if his cousin's death had not happened till a month later he himself would, almost certainly, have been dead before that time—in which case both life and eleven thousand a year would have been lost to him for the sake of one month more of patient waiting. What a surprise it would have been if in “that other place” his shade had suddenly encountered the shade of Lionel Dering! He dismissed the thought with an impatient shrug, but he could not help shivering, and for a moment or two an ice-cold air seemed to blow round him, that lifted his hair with its invisible fingers and touched his heart as with a death-cold hand.

Kester St. George and his uncle break-

fasted tête-à-tête that morning. The meal was rather a late one. Messrs. Drayton and Whiffins had been up for hours, and were out exploring the beauties of the neighbourhood. "And as for Richard," explained the General to Kester, "he's one of the strangest fellows in existence. He takes his meals anyhow and at any time, and one never knows where to look for him, whether indoors or out. Still, I like the boy—yes, I can't help liking him. By-the-by, I think he told me the other day that he had met you once or twice many years ago?"

"I never remember meeting Richard Dering but once," answered Kester. "As you say, sir, that was many years ago."

"Well, if you remember what he was like then, you won't find him much altered now. But here he comes to speak for himself."

As the General spoke, Richard Dering lounged slowly into the room through the open French window. He halted for a moment just inside the room, and the eyes of

the two cousins met across the table, each one curious to see what the other was like.

Kester could not repress a start of surprise when Richard's eyes met his. For the moment it seemed to him that in very truth they could be the eyes of none other than his dead cousin. They were the same in colour—dark gray—and the same in expression. But when he came to look more closely, he thought he saw in them something different; a something hard to define, but palpably there. Eyes, they were, cold, serious, stern, and vengeful almost; with nothing in them of that frank happy light which used to shine out of the eyes of Lionel Dering. And yet, with all this, Kester could not but feel that the similarity was startling. And then the voice, too! It might have been Lionel's very self who spoke. It thrilled through Kester as though it were a voice speaking from the tomb.

Beyond the eyes and the voice, the points of dissimilarity between Richard and his dead brother were marked enough. Lionel had

been fair-complexioned, with light flaxen beard and moustache, and wavy hair. Richard's complexion, naturally very swarthy, had been still further browned by exposure to an Indian sun. He had short, straight, jet-black hair, parted carefully down the middle. He wore no beard or whiskers, but cultivated a thick drooping moustache of the darkest shade of brown. Running in a line from his left eyebrow down his cheek was the cicatrice or scar of an old wound, the result of an accident in boyhood.

Kester had a distinct recollection of this scar. It had struck him on the only previous occasion of his seeing Richard, as being a great disfigurement to an otherwise comely face. When you caught Richard's profile, you said at once how like he was to his brother: in fact, both brothers had the St. George features—clear, bold, distinctly marked. Which, perhaps, was one reason why the General took to them more than he ever did to Kester, whose features were of a different type.

The two men eyed each other for a moment or two in silence. They might have been two gladiators about to engage in a deadly struggle, each of whom was measuring the other's strength. "This man is my enemy," was the thought that flashed through Kester's brain; and for the moment his heart sank within him. The dark, stern, resolute-looking man before him would be a very different sort of person to cope with, from good-tempered, easy-going Lionel.

"Kester, this is my nephew, Richard, from India," said the General. "Dick, this is your cousin, Kester St. George. You have met before, so I need not say another word."

Kester rose from his chair, advanced a step or two, and held out his hand. "Yes, we have met before," he said, "but that was many years ago; so many that I should hardly have recognized you had I seen you in the street. Allow me to welcome you back from India. I hope you won't think of wandering so far away from home again."

Kester spoke with that assumption of

warm-hearted impulsiveness which he knew so well how to put on. Five men out of six would have been thoroughly deceived by it.

"I have not forgotten *you*," said Richard, in reply. "Yours is a face that I could never forget. I shall not go back to India for some time to come—not till I have accomplished the task which has brought me here. You may take my word for that!"

He spoke with a cold deliberation that made his words seem very impressive. Cold, too, and pulseless was the hand that he laid for a moment on Kester's outstretched palm. But when he said, "You may take my word for that," he gave his cousin's hand a sudden sharp grip, and then dropped it. Kester shuddered and sat down.

"Won't you come and have some breakfast with us?" asked General St. George.

"I breakfasted two hours ago, and have no appetite," answered Richard. "Should you want me, you will find me under the big yew tree in the garden. I have put a volume of Dante in my pocket, and I am going to

see whether I have quite forgotten my Italian."

"Fine fellow that; very fine," said the General admiringly, as Richard shut the door behind him. "So earnest about everything—so determined to go through with any matter that he sets his heart upon."

"What can the particular task be which he has set himself to accomplish before going back to India?" asked Kester of himself. "I would give something to know. And yet, what can it matter to me? When once I get away from here I hope never to set eyes on him again. I shall travel for a couple of years; and by the time I get back home he will have returned to India. No; nothing can matter to me, now that Lionel Dering is dead, and that Park Newton is at last my own!"

Lionel's name had hardly been mentioned between uncle and nephew on the previous night. There had been a mutual avoidance of all unpleasant topics during the hour that intervened between Kester's arrival and his

retirement for the night. But the object of his visit to the Villa Pamphili was one, the discussion of which this morning could not much longer be postponed ; and he thought it best to plunge at once into the subject himself, rather than leave it for his uncle to introduce.

“How long was my cousin with you at this place before he died?” asked Kester.

“It will be a month to-morrow since he came here,” answered the General. “I never got from him how he found me out—indeed, he was not in a fit state to be troubled with questions of any kind. It did not take long to discover that his days in this world were very few in number. The first few days after he came he brightened up, and seemed to be stronger and better. But there soon came a morning when he did not get up as usual—and he never got up again. He sank slowly but surely, and five days ago he died. His end was as peaceful as that of any little child.”

The General paused for a moment : Kester sat listening like a man turned to stone.

Once he essayed to speak, but the sound died away in his throat. Petrified and dumb sat he.

“It is all for the best, perhaps, that he has left us,” resumed the old man. “I try to console myself by thinking so. To live for ever the life of a hunted criminal; to go through the world with the brand of a murderer on his brow; to have every hope and feeling, and all that makes life sweet and dear to ordinary mortals, crushed out of him by the weight of a terrible accusation from which it seemed impossible that he could ever free himself, was more than he could bear. His heart broke, and he died.”

Petrified and dumb still sat Kester St. George.

“The circumstances of the case were so peculiar,” resumed the General, “that when I saw my poor boy was really gone, I hardly knew what steps would be the most proper to take. For me merely to have made an affidavit that on a certain day, and under my roof, Lionel Dering died, might not have

seemed sufficient proof in point of law that such were really the facts. I had your interests to think of in the matter. Satisfactory proof of your cousin's death must be forthcoming before Park Newton could become your property, or one penny of its revenue find its way into your pockets. The question, as it seemed to me, resolved itself into one of simple identification. I communicated with you, but at the same time I communicated with the police authorities in London. As you are already aware, Mr. Drayton and another officer reached here yesterday, a few hours before you. Pearce, the old butler from Park Newton, is also here, and will swear, if requisite, to the identity of the dead man with my poor nephew. In Pearce's charge, the body will, in the course of a few days, be conveyed to Park Newton for interment in the family vault. Lionel died five days ago, and it became requisite to have the remains enclosed in a shell ; but, in order that there should be no dispute as to identification, a glass plate has been let into the lid of the

shell, so that the features underneath can be plainly seen. For the present, the remains have found a temporary resting-place in the little Church of San Michele, in the village close by. Thither, in an hour's time, I am going with Mr. Drayton and his friend. If you would like to see your poor cousin's face for the last time, you can go with us."

The General had nothing more to say, and began to chip an egg. Kester came back to life at last. A ray of sunlight coming suddenly through an interstice of the venetians, smote him across the eyes. He turned impatiently in his chair. The pallor of his face deepened. He wiped his forehead and the corners of his mouth with his handkerchief. It was a little while before he spoke. "Yes, I will go with you," he said at last in a voice that was scarcely more than a whisper.

An hour later General St. George, accompanied by his nephew, and followed by Mr. Drayton and Sergeant Whiffins, set out for the Church of San Michele. As they walked through the grounds of the villa, they passed

the yew-tree under which sat Richard Dering in a basket chair, deep in his Italian studies.

The General halted for a moment. "I suppose you don't care to go with us, Richard?" he said.

"No, thank you, uncle," answered Richard. "I have been there once this morning already, and I shall go again, alone, before the day is over."

The General passed on. Richard bowed to Mr. Drayton and Sergeant Whiffins, who eyed him curiously, and then went on with his reading.

The Church of San Michele proved to be a building of fine architectural proportions, dating from the end of the fifteenth century. Underneath it were row after row of spacious vaults: in one corner of which, on a slab of dark-blue slate, partly covered with a velvet pall, and with two tall wax tapers burning at its head, they found the object of their search.

General St. George went forward and stationed himself at the head of the coffin. Mr.

Drayton took up a position on one side of it, and Mr. Whiffins on the other. But Kester lingered in the background among the shadows of the crypt. It seemed as if his feet refused to drag him any nearer.

Drayton and Whiffins had seen death often, and in various forms. They were men not easily impressed ; but there was something in the circumstances and surroundings of the present case that appealed to them with more than ordinary force. There, before them, lay the lifeless body of the man who had escaped so strangely from their clutches ; on whose head a price had been set ; who had broken his heart in a vain struggle against the destiny which had crushed him down ; and who had now escaped from them again, and this time for ever. Did the red right hand of a murderer lie in that coffin, or was it really as guiltless of the stain of blood as the dead man himself had asseverated ; and as those who knew him best had been ready to swear ? Could those white lips but have spoken now, could they have given utterance

to but one word from beyond the confines of the grave, surely the truth would have been proclaimed. But not till the great day of all would their awful silence ever be broken.

Drayton and Whiffins, drawing nearer to the coffin, gazed down through the glass plate at the immovable features underneath. Kester, leaning against one of the cold stone pillars, shuddered, but drew no nearer. Beyond the faint circle of light which radiated from the tapers, all was obscurity and gloom the most profound. Far away among the black recesses of those far-reaching aisles, among those endless rows of time-stained pillars, he heard, or seemed to hear, faint chill whisperings as from lips long dead, and the all but inaudible rustle of ghostly garments sweeping slowly across the floor.

"This is really our man, I suppose?" whispered the Scotland Yard officer to Mr. Drayton.

"Yes, that's him, sure enough," answered Drayton, in the same tone. "He was close-shaved when he got out of prison, but his

moustache and beard have had time to grow again since then. Yes, that's him, sure enough. I could swear to him anywhere."

There was nothing more to do or see, and they moved slowly away.

"Will you not take one look?" said General St. George to Kester.

"Yes, one look," whispered Kester; and with that he dragged himself close up to the coffin, and stood gazing down for a moment at the marble face below.

His own cheeks had faded to the colour of those of the dead man. In the yellow candlelight his features looked cadaverous and shrunken, but his two burning eyes glowed with a strange light, eager yet terrified. He wanted to see—he would not have gone away satisfied unless he had seen—the face which lay there in all its awful beauty; and yet his whole soul sank within him at the sight. Fascinated—spellbound he stood.

"Yes, that is Lionel Dering," he whispered to himself. "Park Newton is mine at last,

and eleven thousand a-year. Why did he ever cross my path?"

General St. George threw a corner of the pall over the coffin, and the two men turned to go, leaving the candles still burning. The sacristan with his keys was waiting for them at the top of the stone staircase which led to the church above. General St. George went up the stairs first, slowly and painfully: Kester followed a step or two behind. As his foot rested on the lowest stair of the vault he felt once again the Hand laid for a moment heavily on his shoulder—he heard once again the Voice whisper in his ear,

“Come.”

He shivered involuntarily. Involuntarily he turned half round, as he always did at such times, although he knew quite well that there was nothing to be seen. No: the coffin lay there as they had left it a minute ago, untouched, unmoved. But it was not his voice—not the voice of him who lay sleeping so peacefully there—that haunted the ear of Kester St. George, and filled his life with a

dread unspeakable. It was the voice of the man, who had been done to death so foully at Park Newton, that whispered to him thus often out of his untimely shroud.

Some hours later, as Richard Dering was crossing the entrance-hall of the villa, a low voice called his name from an upper floor. He looked up and saw Edith's earnest face shining down upon him.

"Are they gone—the two officers of police?" she asked.

"They left the villa two hours ago."

"Satisfied?"

"Perfectly satisfied."

"Thank Heaven for that!" she said, fervently. "And Kester, what of him?"

"He will take his leave immediately after dinner. He has declined Uncle Lionel's invitation to stay all night."

"You will have to see him again before he goes?"

"Yes—just for a minute or two. I shall not dine with him."


“Be careful.”

“There is not the slightest cause for fear.
But here he comes.”

Edith's eyes met his for a moment, and her lips broke into a smile. She disappeared just as Kester St. George opened the glass door that led from the garden into the villa.

CHAPTER X.

BACK AGAIN AT PARK NEWTON.

ENERAL ST. GEORGE'S health improved so rapidly that, contrary to his first intention, he decided that he would return to England at once and, if possible, get settled down somewhere by Christmas. As he was running his eyes through the "Times" one day he saw, to his intense astonishment, that Park Newton was advertised as to be let. By the next post he sent a brief note to Kester, calling his attention to the advertisement, and asking him the meaning of it. In due course he received the following reply :

"MY DEAR UNCLE,—The advertisement to

which you allude has no other meaning than is visible on the surface of it. Park Newton is empty, and empty it will remain as far as I am concerned. Why not, therefore, try to find a tenant for it, and make at the same time a welcome addition to my income? I know what you will say—that, as the head of the family, it is my duty to live in the family home. That is very well from your point of view, but to me the place is burdened with a memory so terrible (which time can never efface or cause to fade from my mind) that for me to live there is a sheer impossibility.

“But, apart from all this, I think you know me sufficiently well to feel sure that to me a country life would soon become insupportable. After the first freshness had worn off—after I had eaten some of my own peaches and drunk some of my own buttermilk—after I had been duly coached by my bailiff in the mysteries of subsoils and top-dressings—and after going through all the dull round of bucolic hospitality: I should be sure to cut the whole affair in disgust some fine

day, and not recover my peace of mind till after a little dinner at the *Trois Frères* and a stall at the *Gymnase*.

“So, my dear uncle, should you happen to hear of any eligible individual who would be content to pass his days among the dull but respectable commonplaces of English country life, pray try to secure him as a tenant for Park Newton, and render grateful for ever—
Your affectionate nephew,

“KESTER ST. GEORGE.

“P.S. You say nothing in your note as to the state of your health. May I take it in this case that no news is good news, and that you are stronger and better than when I saw you last? I hope so with all my heart.”

To this General St. George sent the following answer :

“DEAR NEPHEW,—*I* will become the tenant of Park Newton. If one member of the family doesn't choose to live there, all the more reason why another should. No stran-

ger shall call the old roof-tree his home while I am alive. I am better in health, thank Heaven, and you will probably see me in England before Christmas.—Yours,

“LIONEL ST. GEORGE.”

In taking this step General St. George was guided as much by Richard Dering's wishes as by his own inclinations in the matter. “Nothing could have fallen out more opportunely for the purpose I have in view,” Richard had said to him when the advertisement was first noticed.

“I can't see in what way it will assist your views for you to immure yourself at Park Newton,” said the General.

“I shall be there on the spot itself,” answered Richard ; “and that seems to me one of the first essentials.”

“You fairly puzzle me,” said the General, with a shake of the head. “I can't see what more you can do than you have done already. It seems to me like groping in the dark.”

“You are right, uncle—it is like groping in

the dark. And yet I feel as sure as that I am standing here at the present moment that sooner or later a ray of light will be vouchsafed to me from somewhere. As to when and how it will come, I know nothing; but that it will come, if I clothe my soul with patience, I never for one moment doubt."

"My poor boy! But why not let well alone? You are wasting your life in the chase of a phantom. Be content with what you have achieved already."

"Never—never—so help me Heaven! I will go on groping in the dark as you call it, till in that dark I clutch my enemy's hand—and drag out of it into the full light of day the man on whose head lies the innocent blood of Percy Osmond."

"A waste of youth, of hope, of happiness," said the old soldier sadly.

"For me there is neither youth, nor hope, nor happiness, till my task is accomplished. Uncle, I have set myself to do this thing, and no power on earth can move me from it."

"I am heart and soul with you, boy, as you

know full well already. But at times it does seem to me as if you were following nothing better than a deceptive will-o'-the-wisp, which, the further you follow it, the further it will lead you astray."

"No will-o'-the-wisp, uncle, but a steadfast-shining star ; blood-red like Mars, if you will, but a guide across the pathless waste which leads to the goal to which I shall one day surely attain."

Three weeks later General St. George and his nephew were settled at Park Newton, while Mrs. Garside and Edith installed themselves in a pretty little cottage, half a mile beyond the park gates, but on the side opposite to Duxley.

Lionel Dering's marriage was still kept a profound secret : and as Edith, during the short time she had lived at Duxley, had never gone out without a thick veil over her face, there was not much fear that she would be recognized in her new home. Richard Dering rode over to the Cottage every other day, and we may be sure that Jane Culpepper was also

a frequent visitor. Equally a matter of course was it that Tom Bristow, by the merest chance in the world, should often call in during the very time that Miss Culpepper was there : for Providence is kind to lovers, and seems often to arrange meetings for them, without their taking any trouble to do so on their own account.

Not a single day—nay, not a single hour had Kester St. George spent at Park Newton since his accession to the property. He had been down to Duxley on two occasions, and had taken up his quarters at the Royal Hotel, where his steward had waited upon him for the transaction of necessary business, and where the chief tenants of the estate had been invited to a banquet at his expense. But not once had he set foot even inside the park gates. He hated the place, the neighbourhood, the people. London and Paris, according to his view, were the only places fit for a man of fortune to live in, and it was from the latter place that he despatched a letter to his uncle, half ironical in tone, congratulating that vete-

ran on his choice of the ancestral roof-tree for his future home, and hoping that he might live for fifty years to enjoy it. The General smiled grimly to himself as he read the letter and tossed it over to Richard.

"Uncle, you must invite him here before we are many weeks older," said the latter.

"But he hates the place, and won't come."

"He hates the place undoubtedly, but he will come all the same if you couch your invitation properly."

"In what terms would you like me to couch it?"

"Pardon me for saying so, but you have only got to hint that you feel you are growing old, and that you have serious thoughts of making your will before long, and then press him to come and see you."

"And you think the bait will tempt him?"

"I am sure of it. Your property would make a nice addition to his income. He would be the most dutiful and affectionate of nephews as long as you lived; he would bury you with every outward semblance of regret; and a

month later there would be another horse in his stable at Newmarket."

"Faith, I believe you're right, Dick! But not a single penny of my money will ever go to Kester St. George. All the same I'll write the letter in the way you wish it to be written, when you tell me that the time for sending it has come."

"We will let Christmas get quietly over, and then we will talk about it again."

But still the General was puzzled. "I'm bothered if I can comprehend why you want to invite Kester to Park Newton," he said. "You hate the man, and yet you want me to ask him to come and stop under the same roof with you, where you must, out of common courtesy, meet him once or twice a day all the time he is here."

"The coming of Kester St. George to Park Newton may help us to another link in the chain of evidence which Bristow and I together are trying to forge out of the very poor materials at our command. It may prove in the end to be nothing better than a chain of

sand—or it may prove strong enough to drag a murderer to his doom.”

The General shuddered slightly. “Your words are very strong, my boy,” he said. “I have seen so many tragedies in the course of the sixty years I have lived in this world that I have no desire ever to see another—least of all among those of my own kith and kin.”

Richard did not answer at once. He rose from his chair, went to the window, and stood gazing out across the frosty landscape. At length he spoke gravely, almost sadly.

“My hand is put to the plough, uncle, and I cannot—I dare not draw back.”

“No doubt you are right and I am wrong,” said the General, meekly. “But I sometimes tremble when I look into the future, and ask myself what all these disguises and plottings have for their aim and object.”

“They have but one aim and one object,” said Richard, sternly, “both of which are comprised in one word—and that word is Retribution.”

“ ‘Vengeance is mine : I will repay, saith the Lord,’ ” answered the old soldier, in a reverent whisper.

A deep sigh came from the bosom of the younger man. Again he paused before answering. “ Oh, uncle ! is there no pity, no thought for me ? ” he said. “ Think of what I have suffered, of all that I have undergone ! Name, wealth, position, lost to me for ever unless I can prove I am not the murderer that the world believes me to be. My very identity gone. Obligated to die and be buried, and assume the name and identity of another man ; or live the life of a hunted animal, with a price set on my head, and with the ever-present shadow of a shameful death eating the life out of me inch by inch. Oh, think of all, and pity me ! ”

“ I have thought of it all, day and night, night and day, for months. You know that I pity you from the bottom of my soul. ”

“ Had it not been for you, and Edith, and Bristow—God bless him !—I should have shot myself long ago. ”

“Don’t talk in that way, Dick—don’t talk in that way!”

“Unless—unless I had taught myself to live for the sake of retribution,” went on the other as if he had not heard his uncle’s words. “And retribution is not vengeance; it is simple repayment—simple justice.” He paused like one deep in thought.

“Do you know, uncle,” he resumed with a startling change of tone—“do you know that a night hardly ever passes without my being visited by Percy Osmond? His cold hand touches mine and I awake to see him standing close beside me. He never speaks, he only looks at me. But oh! that look—so pleading, so reproachful, so soul-imploring! Awake and asleep it haunts me ever. It is a look that says, ‘How much longer shall I lie in my blood-stained shroud, and justice not be done upon my murderer?’ It is a look that says, ‘Another day gone by and nothing done—nothing discovered.’ Then he fades gradually, and I see no more of him till next night; but my hand remains numb and

cold for more than an hour after he has left me."

The General was staring at Richard as if he could hardly believe the evidence of his ears. "Come," he said very gently, "let us take a turn in the garden. The air of this room is oppressive. Give me your arm, boy. This English winter finds out the weak places in an old man's joints."

As they paced the garden arm in arm, Richard (or Lionel—for Lionel it was, as the reader will long ago have surmised) went back to the topic he had last been talking about. "Were I to tell to a physician what I have just told you," he said, "he would simply put me down as the victim of a mental hallucination; he would tell me that I was suffering from a by no means uncommon form of cerebral excitement. So be it. I suppose I am the victim of a mental hallucination: but call it by what name you will, to me it is a most serious and terrible reality—a visitation that no medicines, no society, no change of scene, can alter or rid me of; that one

thing alone can rid me of. When I have accomplished the bitter task that is appointed me to do, then, and then only, will this burden be lifted off my soul : then, and not till then, will Percy Osmond cease to visit me." Again he sighed deeply. The General pressed the arm that held his a little more tightly, but did not speak. The case was beyond his simple skill. He was powerless to comfort or console the bruised spirit by his side. In silence they finished their walk.

But comfort and consolation were not altogether denied to Lionel Dering. Edith, and she alone, had power to charm away the cloud from off his brow, the shadow from off his heart. For the time being, all his troubles and anxieties were forgotten. For a little while, when with her, he would seem like the Lionel Dering of other days : buoyant, hopeful, full of energy, and glad with the promise of the happy future before him. But when he had kissed her and said good-night, long before he reached Park Newton, the cloud would be back again as deep as before. The

burden which, as he firmly believed, had been laid upon his shoulders seemed to grow heavier from day to day. "Oh that I could cast it from me!" he would often say to himself with a sort of anguish. "Why did I not go to the other side of the world at first? There peace and obscurity would have been mine. But it is too late now—too late!"

CHAPTER XI.

MRS. MACDERMOTT WANTS HER MONEY.



QUIRE CULPEPPER was laid up with an attack of his old enemy the gout. Thereby his temper was by no means improved. But to the ordinary pains which attend podagra was superadded another source of irritation and alarm. The shares of the Alcazar Silver Mining Company, in which promising speculation the Squire had invested the whole of his savings, had of late been going down slowly but steadily in the market. It was altogether unaccountable. They had no sooner reached the high-water point of value than they began to fall. But the difficulty had been to know when the high-water mark was reached. The

Squire had bought at a low figure—at a remarkably low figure—and when, subsequently, the shares had risen so tremendously in value, he had often been tempted to sell out and realize. But the temptation to keep holding on, in the hope of being able to realize still larger profits, had hitherto proved the stronger of the two.

At first he had looked upon the decline as being merely one of those ordinary market fluctuations such as even the best securities are liable to at times. But at length he took alarm and wrote to his friend Mr. Bird, the secretary of the company, and the man who had persuaded him to invest so heavily in Alcazar securities.

To the Squire's letter Mr. Bird replied as under :

“MY DEAR MR. CULPEPPER,—Your note of yesterday did not surprise me in the least. I quite expected to hear from you some days ago respecting the fall in Alcazars. Several other shareholders have either written to me

or seen me on the same subject. The truth is that the partisans of a rival company (a company, be it said, whose shares have never yet risen to par, and are never likely to do so) have been doing their best to injure us by spreading abroad a report that a sudden irruption of water had put a stop to all our workings for an indefinite length of time. The whole affair is an infamous canard, having no other object than to discredit us in the opinion of the public. Unfortunately it is next to impossible to bring such things home to any particular individual, but I have every reason to believe that one or two who are most deeply implicated in this scandalous affair have been buying heavily for the rise which is sure to take place in a few days from the present time; and I strongly advise you, my dear sir, to follow their example. You cannot possibly do better. So satisfied am I on that point, that within the last few days I have invested every spare shilling of my own in Alcazars.

“In conclusion, I may just state that ac-

ording to advices from our South American managers up to the latest date, received by me per last night's mail, the mine was never in so flourishing a condition as at the present moment.

“It is with the utmost confidence that I look forward to the declaration of a dividend and a bonus equivalent in the gross to seventy-five per cent. per annum, at the close of the current half-year.

“I remain, my dear Mr. Culpepper,

“Very truly yours,

“THEODORE BIRD.”

This letter allayed the Squire's fears and kept him quiet for several days. Strange to say, however, the Alcazars still kept steadily declining, and at length the old man became seriously alarmed. He wrote again to Mr. Bird, but this time there came no answer. For five days he waited in such a state of mental agony, as he had never known before. He would have gone up to London himself, in order to see Mr. Bird, but by this time the

gout had laid hold of him so severely that it was quite impossible for him to venture out of the house. What to do he knew not. No one, not even his daughter, knew how, or in what speculation, he had invested his money, and yet it was evident that he must now take some one into his confidence in the matter, or else be prepared to let the Alcazars go up or down at their own sweet will, and accept the result, whatever it might be, when he should be sufficiently recovered to attend to business himself. But in the face of matters, as they now stood, that was more than he could afford to do—it was more than he dare do. Where, then, was the person on whose honour, discretion, and good business knowledge he could safely rely to assist him in the dilemma in which he now found himself? He had employed five or six brokers at different times during the last eighteen months to buy stock for him, but he had no particular knowledge of, or confidence in, any of them. In Mr. Bird himself he had always placed the most implicit confidence, but that confidence had been

severely shaken of late. Bird had originally been a protégé of his own, and had been placed by him as a junior clerk in Mr. Cope's bank. There he had remained for years, gradually working his way up, and always very grateful to the Squire for the interest that he had taken in his welfare. Then came an advantageous removal to London, after which the Squire lost sight of him for several years. When he next turned up it was as secretary to the Alcazar Mining Company, and as promoter of several other speculative schemes, with a fine house in the Regent's Park, a capital cellar of wines, and a pair of steppers in his brougham that a duchess might have been proud of. The Squire went to dine with him. Mr. Bird did not fail delicately to insinuate that to Mr. Culpepper's generous kindness in giving him such an excellent start in life he attributed all his after success, and that the blessings by which he was now surrounded owed their origin to the Squire alone. Before the day was over, Mr. Cul-

pepper had agreed to invest a very considerable sum in Alcazar stock.

Squire Culpepper's income, considering his position and influence, was anything but a large one. It amounted in all to very little more than three thousand a year. The estate itself was strictly entailed, all but one corner of it, which had been bought by the present Squire and added to it. It was in this corner that he had proposed to build his new mansion. But unless the Alcazar shares should rise very much again in public favour, there would be no funds forthcoming wherewith to build a new mansion, or even to repair the old one.

Out of this income of three thousand a year the Squire had always contrived to save something ; and thus, little by little, he had gradually accumulated some fifteen thousand pounds. This was to be Jane's dowry when she should marry. It was the hope of being able to turn this fifteen thousand into sixty or seventy thousand that had been his first inducement to speculate ; and had he

sold out when the Alcazars were at the flood tide of their success, not only would this hope have been realized, but what to many had seemed an idle boast, that before long he would have built for him a new and a more magnificent Pincote, would have become a substantial reality.

These golden prospects, however, these magnificent castles in the air, had of late been losing their brightness and were fast resolving themselves into the misty cloud-land from which they had sprung. Very loath, indeed, was the Squire to let them go. Buoyed up by Mr. Bird's letter, he had deferred from day to day the painful act of selling out, still clinging with desperate tenacity to his cloudy battlements, and trying with all his might to believe that the frown which fortune had of late put on had been merely assumed to frighten him for a little while, and that behind it her golden smile was still lurking, and ready at any time to shine on him again.

But, by-and-by, there came a day when the Alcazars, still bent on going down, reached at

one fell plunge a lower deep than they had ever dropped to before. Next morning they were quoted in the lists at ten shillings per share less than they had been on the day when Squire Culpepper, allured by their fatal beauty, ventured on his first investment.

The London papers reached Pincote about luncheon time; and on this particular day the Squire, with his leg swathed in flannel, was just discussing a basin of chicken broth when the post came in. With eager fingers that trembled with excitement he tore off the wrapper, turned to the City article, and there read the fatal news. The blow was so stunning that for a little while he could scarcely realize it. He pushed away his basin of broth untasted. His head drooped into his hands, and bitter tears sprang to his eyes. For the first time since his wife's death the old man cried.

With his newspapers had come several letters, but they all lay untouched beside him for more than an hour. By-and-by he roused himself sufficiently from his abstraction to

turn them listlessly over, and then to take them up one after another and stare at their superscriptions with glazed, incurious eyes. There was only one, and it was the last one that he took up, which roused his dull senses to any sign of recognition. "This must be from Fanny," he said. "I'd swear to her writing anywhere. All the way from Ems, too. Still as fond of those nauseous German waters as ever she was. No wonder she's never well." Then his thoughts reverted to his loss, and with a sigh he dropped the letter on the table.

Two or three minutes later a sudden colour flushed his cheeks, and with nervous fingers he sought on the table for the letter from Ems.

"She—she can't be writing for her money!" he said with a gasp. Then he tore open the letter. This is what he read therein:—

"MY DEAR BROTHER,—

"I hope that this will find you quite well, although you were never the man to

give me the least credit for caring about your health. I hope to be in England in the course of another fortnight, when I shall at once make my way to Pincote. I presume that I shall not be looked upon as an intruder if I ask you to find me a bed for a few nights. Goodness knows it is not often I trouble you, and I am sure Jane must have many things to talk about to me, who am her nearest living female relative. As regards the five thousand pounds which I desired you to invest for me, or make use of in any way that might seem most desirable under the circumstances, I shall be glad if you will arrange to hand it over to me, together with any amount that may have accrued to it for interest, immediately upon my arrival at Pincote. I have decided to invest all my available funds in real estate : nothing else seems permanent and safe in these days of chances and changes. For my part, I shan't be a bit surprised if within the next ten years we see the guillotine as hard at work again as ever it was in the dreadful days of the First Revo-

lution. I think it right to let you know about the money so that you may be prepared. Give my love to Jane. I hope her hair is no longer that intolerable red that it used to be. The resources of art are many and various, and something could doubtless be done for her. But I must talk to her about all these matters when I see her, although I am afraid that nothing can ever make her pretty. Believe me your loving sister,

“FANNY MACDERMOTT.

“P.S.—Don’t give me a bedroom that faces either the east or the north ; and not too many stairs to climb.”

Jane Culpepper, coming into the room a quarter of an hour later, found her father lying in a sort of heap in his chair and quite unconscious. He was carried to bed ; and Dr. Davidson was quickly on the spot. The attack, although sufficiently alarming, was pronounced to be not immediately dangerous, and in about a couple of hours the Squire had

thoroughly recovered consciousness. His first words, whispered in Jane's ear, were, "Send for young Bristow." Jane could hardly believe that she had heard aright, and bent her head again that her father might repeat his words. Then, wondering greatly, she sent off a brief note to Tom, asking him to come up to Pincote with as little delay as possible. Two hours later Tom was there.

By this time the Squire was sufficiently recovered to be able to sit up in bed and talk in a feeble, querulous way, very different from his ordinary bluff, hearty style. Why he had sent for Tom he could not have told any one: he did not know himself. Tom's name had sprung instinctively to his lips while he was yet only half conscious—a pretty sure proof that Tom's image must have been in his thoughts previously.

"Bristow," he said feebly as he held his hand out to Tom, "I want you to do me a favour."

"You may command me, sir, in any and every way," was Tom's hearty answer.

“I have invested a considerable amount of money in the Alcazar Silver Mining Company.”

“Ah!” interjected Tom, and his face lengthened visibly.

“The shares have been going down for this month past—not that I have by any means lost confidence in them—and I want you to go up to London for me, being laid up myself with this cursed gout, and inquire personally into the stability of the concern. I won’t conceal from you that I am slightly anxious and uneasy, although I have Bird’s word for it—clever fellow, Bird, very: you ought to know him—that the present panic is merely a temporary affair, and that the shares will go up again, in a few days, higher than they have ever been yet. In any case, there can be no harm in your making a few private inquiries on my behalf, and reporting the result to me. You are not very busy, I suppose, and you could go up to town—when?” His tone was very anxious as he asked this question.

"By the next train," answered Tom.

"Good boy—good boy!" said the Squire gratefully. "And you'll telegraph me, won't you? Don't wait to write, but telegraph to me."

"Don't think me impertinent if I ask you to tell me the extent of your liabilities as regards the Alcazar Mining Company."

"Why—ah—I cannot tell you to a fraction. A few thousands, I suppose. But I don't see how that fact can interest you."

Tom's long face grew still longer. "Don't you think, sir," he said, "that it might be advisable for you to empower me to sell out your stock in your behalf, should I find on inquiry to-morrow that there is the least likelihood] of its sinking any lower than it is now?"

"Sell out!" exclaimed the Squire in horror. "Certainly not. What next, pray? Bird said the shares were sure to go up again, and I'll pin my faith to Bird through thick and thin."

It was with a sad heart that Tom left Pin-

cote. He knew something of the Alcazar Mining Company, and he had no faith in its stability. He knew something of Mr. Bird, the secretary, and he had no faith in his honesty.

Mrs. MacDermott was Squire Culpepper's only sister. She had been a widow for several years. She was perpetually travelling about, ostensibly in search of health, but really in search of change and excitement. The money about which she was writing to her brother was a sum of five thousand pounds which she had put into his hands some two or three years previously, with a request that he would invest it for her in some way, or put it to whatever use he might deem most advisable. He had managed her monetary affairs for her ever since her husband's death, and there was nothing strange in such a request. At first the amount had been invested in railway debentures, which brought in a modest four per cent. But when the Alcazar shares began to rise so rapidly, it seemed to the Squire that he would have been wronging his sister had

he neglected to let her participate in the wonderful golden harvest that lay so close to his hand. To have written to her on the subject would have been the merest matter of form. She would only have answered, "Don't bother me, but do as you like with the money till I want it for something else." Then what a glorious surprise it would be to her to find that her little fortune had actually trebled and quadrupled itself in so short a space of time! Nothing venture, nothing win. The railway debentures were at once disposed of and Alcazar shares bought in their stead; and the Squire chuckled to himself many a time when he thought of his happy audacity in acting as he had done without consulting any one except his friend Mr. Bird.

But in proportion to his previous exultation was the dread which now chilled his heart, that not only might his daughter's dowry be lost to her for ever, but that his sister's money also—the savings of many years—might be sunk beyond recovery in the wreck that now seemed so close at hand.

Most people under such circumstances would have telegraphed to their brokers to sell out at every risk; but there was a mixture of hopefulness and obstinacy in the Squire's disposition that made him cling to his purpose with a tenacity that would go far either to ruin him or make his fortune, as the case might be.

Tom Bristow did not reach London till long after business hours, but so anxious was he with regard to the matter which had taken him there, that he could not sit down comfortably and wait till morning before beginning his inquiries. After spending ten minutes at his hotel he took a hansom and drove off at once to the offices of the Alcazar Mining Company. The private watchman whose duty it was to look after the premises at night at once supplied him with Mr. Bird's address, and half an hour later Tom found himself in the neighbourhood of the Regent's Park. Mr. Bird's house was readily found, but Mr. Bird himself was not at home, as a rough-looking man with a short pipe in his

mouth who, somewhat to Tom's surprise, answered his impatient knock, at once told him.

"Where is Mr. Bird, and when can I see him?" asked Tom.

"As to where he is—I should say that by this time he's some hundreds of miles on his way to America or Australia. As to when you can see him—why you can see him when you can catch him, and not before."

"Then he's gone?" said Tom incredulously.

"Yes, sir, he's gone. The nest's empty and the bird's flown," added the man with a grin at his own witticism; "and the whole blessed concern has gone to smash."

"And the Squire will expect a telegram from me to-night!" muttered Tom.

CHAPTER XII.

FOOTSTEPS IN THE ROOM.

DURING the few months that elapsed between the murder of Percy Osmond and the arrival of General St. George in England, Park Newton had been shut up, Pearce, the old family butler, being left as custodian of the house. Of the former establishment he was allowed to retain his niece, Miss Piper, who had been still-room maid, and Finch, formerly a footman, but afterwards promoted to be Mr. Dering's body-servant; together with a woman or two to do the rough work of the house.

When the General fixed his home at Park Newton these people were all retained in their

places, but their numbers were augmented by eight or ten more. All his life the General had been used to be waited upon by a number of people, and he could not quite get out of the way of it even in England.

On a certain wintry evening early in the new year, Finch and Miss Piper were sitting in the drawing-room toasting their toes before a seasonable fire. Between them was a small table on which stood a decanter of Madeira and two glasses, together with a dish of apples, nuts, and oranges. The family had gone out to dinner, and would not be home till late ; Mr. Pearce had driven into Duxley to pay the tradesmen's accounts, and for the time being Mr. Finch and his fair companion commanded the situation.

Miss Piper wore a dress of rustling plum-coloured silk. At her elbow was a smelling-bottle and a lace-edged handkerchief. Mr. Finch, with one of General St. George's snuff-boxes by his side, was lounging in his easy-chair, with all the graceful nonchalance of an

old club-man who has just partaken of an excellent dinner.

“This Madeira is not so bad,” he said condescendingly, as he swallowed his third glass at a gulp with the gusto of a connoisseur. “Miss Piper,” refilling his glass, “I look towards you. Here’s your very good health. May you live long and die happy.”

“Oh, Mr. Finch! deeply gratified, I’m sure.”

“I must have fallen into a doze just now, because I never heard you when you opened the door, and was quite startled when I saw you standing beside me. But then you always do go about the house more quietly than anybody else—except the ghost himself.”

Miss Piper glanced round with a shudder, and hitched her chair a little nearer the fire and Mr. Finch. “But surely, Mr. Finch,” she said, “you are not one of those who believe that Park Newton is haunted? Uncle Pearce says that he never heard of such rubbish in the whole course of his life.”

“Can a man doubt the evidence of his own senses, ma’am? I have lived in too many good families to have any imagination: I am matter-of-fact to the back-bone. Such being the case, what then? Why simply this, Miss Piper: that I know for a fact this house is haunted. Haven’t I heard noises myself?”

“Gracious goodness! What kind of noises, Mr. Finch?”

“Why—er—rumblings and grumblings, and—er—moanings and scratchings. And haven’t I woke up in the middle of the night, and sat up in bed, and listened and heard strange noises that couldn’t be made by anything mortal? And then in the dusk of evening, haven’t I seen the curtains move, and heard feet come pitter-pattering down the stairs; and far-away doors clash in the dark as if shut by ghostly hands? Dreadful, I assure you.”

“You make me feel quite nervous!” cried Miss Piper, edging an inch nearer.

“The old clock on the second landing has never kept right time since the night of the

murder. And didn't Mary Ryan swear that she saw Mr. Percy Osmond coming downstairs one evening, in his blood-stained shirt?—asking your pardon, Miss Piper, for mentioning such a garment before a lady. These are facts that can't be got over. But there's worse to follow."

"Whatever do you mean, Mr. Finch?"

"At first the house was haunted by one ghost, but now they do say there's two of them."

"Oh, lor! Two! And whose is the second one?"

"Why, whose ghost should it be but that of our late master, Mr. Lionel Dering? Five servants have left in six weeks, and I shall give warning next Saturday."

"My nerves are turning to jelly," returned Miss Piper. "Oh, Mr. Finch, we should be dull indeed at Park Newton if you were to go away!"

"Then why not go with me and make my life one long happiness? You know my feelings, you know that I——"

“No more of that, Mr. Finch, if you please. I know your feelings, and you know my sentiments. Nothing can ever change them. But don't let us talk any more nonsense. I want you to tell me about the ghosts.”

“I don't know that I've much more to tell,” said Finch, in a mortified tone.

“But about Mr. Dering—Mr. Lionel, I mean? Which of the servants was it that saw his ghost?”

“I am unable to give you any details, Miss Piper, as I never condescend to listen to the gossip of my inferiors; but I believe it to be the general talk in the servants' hall that the ghost of Mr. Lionel has been seen three or four times slowly pacing the big corridor by moonlight.”

“How were the idiots to know that it was Mr. Lionel Dering?” asked Piper with a toss of the head. “Not one of them ever saw him when he was alive.”

“Yes, Jane Minnows saw him in court during the trial, and she knew the ghost the moment she saw it.”

“But then Jane Minnows was a terrible storyteller, and just as likely as not to invent all about the ghost simply to get herself talked about. But tell me, Mr. Finch, have you not noticed the remarkable likeness that exists between Mr. Richard Dering and his poor brother?”

“As a gentleman of discernment, Miss Piper, I have noticed the likeness of which you speak. He has the very same nose, the very same hands, the very same way of sitting in his chair. And then the voice! I give you my word of honour that when Mr. Richard yesterday called out rather suddenly ‘Finch,’ you might have knocked me down with a cork. It sounded for all the world as if my poor master had come back from the grave, and had called to me just as he used to do.”

“You are not one of those, Mr. Finch, who believed in the guilt of Mr. Dering?”

“I never did believe in it and I never will to the last day of my life,” said Finch, sturdily. “No one, who knew Mr. Lionel as I knew him,

could harbour such a thought for a single moment."

"Uncle Pearce says exactly the same as you. 'No power on earth could make me believe it.' Them's his very words. But I say, Mr. Finch, isn't the old General a darling?"

"Yes, Miss Piper, I approve of the General—I approve of him very much indeed. But Mr. Kester St. George is a sort of person whom I would never condescend to engage as my employer. I don't like that gentleman. It seems a strange thing to say, but he has never looked his proper self since the night of the murder. His man tells me that he has to drench himself with brandy every morning before he can dress himself. Who knows? Perhaps it's the ghosts. They're enough to turn any man's brain."

"I know that I shouldn't like to go after dark anywhere near where the murder was done," said Miss Piper. "It's a good job they have nailed the door up. There's no getting either in or out of the room now."

“And yet they do say,” remarked Finch, “that on the eighth of every month—you know the murder was done on the eighth of May—a little before midnight, footsteps can be heard—the noise of some one walking about in the nailed-up room. You, as the niece of Mr. Pearce, have not been told this, but it has been known to me all along.”

“But you don’t believe it, Mr. Finch?”

“Well, I don’t know so much about that,” answered Finch, dubiously. “You see it was on account of them footsteps that Sims and Baker left last month. They had been told about the footsteps, and they made up their minds to go and hear them. They did hear them, and they gave warning next day. They told Mr. Pearce that the place wasn’t lively enough for them. But it was the footsteps that drove them away.”

“After what you have told me, I shall be frightened of moving out of my own room after dusk. Listen!” cried Miss Piper, jumping up in alarm. “That’s uncle’s ring at the

side bell. He must have got back before his time."

It was as Finch had stated. Kester St. George was staying as his uncle's guest at Park Newton. The General's letter found him at Paris, where he had been living of late almost en permanence. It was couched in such a style that he saw clearly if he were to refuse the invitation thus given, a breach would be created between his uncle and himself which might never be healed in time to come; and, distasteful as the idea of visiting Park Newton was to him, he was not the man to let any sentimental rubbish, as he himself would have been the first to call it, stand in the way of any possible advantage that might accrue to him hereafter. Rich though he was, he still hankered after his uncle's money-bags almost as keenly as in the days when he was so poor; and in his uncle's letter there were one or two sentences which seemed to imply that the probability of their one day becoming his own was by no means

so remote as he had at one time deemed it to be.

“And who has so much right to the old boy’s savings as I have?” he asked himself. “Certainly not that scowling black-browed Richard Dering. I hope with all my heart that he’ll be gone back to India—or to Jericho—or to the bottom of the sea—before I get to Park Newton.”

But when he did reach Park Newton he found, greatly to his disgust, that Richard Dering was still there, and that there were no signs whatever of his speedy departure. That there was no love lost between the two men was evident both to themselves and others; but although their coolness towards each other could hardly fail to be noticed by General St. George, he never made the slightest allusion to it, but treated them both as if they were the best of possible friends. Kester he treated with greater cordiality than he had ever accorded to him before.

Richard and Kester saw hardly anything of each other except at the dinner-table,

and then the conversation between them was limited to the baldest possible topics. Richard never sat over his wine, and generally asked and obtained his uncle's permission to leave the table the moment dessert was placed upon it. He was an early riser, and had breakfasted and was out riding or walking long before his uncle or cousin made their appearance downstairs.

But these meetings over dinner, brief though they were, were to Kester like a dreadful oft-recurring nightmare which, although it may last for a minute or two only, murders sleep by the dread which it inspires before it comes, and the horror it leaves behind it after it has gone. Richard's voice, his eyes, the swing of his walk, the very pose of his head, were all so many reminders to Kester of a dead and gone man, the faintest recollection of whom he would fain have erased not from his own memory alone, but from that of every one else who had known him. But to hear Richard speak was to hear, as it were, Lionel speaking from the tomb.

General St. George made the delicate state of his health a plea for not seeing much company at Park Newton, nor did he visit much himself. But there was no such restriction on Kester, and he was out nearly every day at one place or another, though he generally contrived to get back in time to dine with his uncle. He had not forgotten Dr. Bolus's advice, and for the last month or two he had been leading a very quiet life indeed. As a result of this, he fancied that there was a decided improvement in the state of his health. In any case, he felt quite sure that the symptoms which had troubled him so much at one time troubled him less frequently now, and were milder at each recurrence. As a consequence, he had shrunk with a sort of morbid dread from seeking any further professional advice. He always felt the worst in a morning—so weak, nervous, and depressed when he woke up from the three or four hours of troubled sleep, which was all that nature could now be persuaded to give him. Let him tire himself as he might, he never could

get much more sleep than when he went to bed comparatively fresh, the consequence simply being that he was more weak and ill than usual next morning. For a little while he tried narcotics; but the remedy proved worse than the disease it was intended to cure. More sleep he got, it is true; but sleep so burdened with frightful dreams that it seemed to him as if it would be better to lie awake for ever, than run the risk of floating helplessly in such a sea of horrors any more.

As Finch had said, he had to dose himself heavily with brandy before he could dress and crawl downstairs to breakfast. But as the day wore on he always got stronger and better, so that by the time it was necessary to dress for dinner, he was quite like his old self again, as well seemingly and as buoyant as the Kester St. George of a dozen years before. It was the dark hours that tried him most, when he was left alone in his great gloomy bedroom, with a candle, and a book, and his own thoughts.

He had brought his valet with him to Park Newton. Not Pierre Janvard this time. Pierre had left Mr. St. George's service a little while previously, and had started business on his own account as an hotel keeper at Bath.

Mr. St. George's new valet was an Englishman named Dobbs. He was a well-trained servant—noiseless, deferential, smooth-spoken, and treating all his master's whims and capricious fluctuations of temper as the merest matter of course: a man who would allow himself to be sworn at, and called an idiot, an ass, the biggest blockhead in existence; and retaliate only with a faint smile of deprecation, and a gentle rubbing of his lean white hands.

Mr. St. George had a strange dislike to being left alone. When he could not have any other society—that is to say, early in the morning, and late at night, after everybody else was in bed—he would rather have the company of Dobbs than that of his own thoughts only. In a morning, between six and seven—long before daylight in winter—Dobbs was there in his master's room, arrang-

ing his clothes, laying out his dressing-case, mixing him his cup of chocolate, supplying him with his brandy, doing anything—it did not matter what—so long as he was not out of his master's sight for many minutes at a time.

Then at night, late, when the old house was as quiet as a tomb, Mr. St. George would sit in his dressing-room, drinking cold brandy-and-water, and smoking cigars till far into the small hours. It was Dobbs's duty at such times to sit with his master in a chair removed a few yards away, and a little behind that of Mr. St. George. It was not that Kester wanted him there for conversational purposes, for he rarely condescended to speak to him except to ask him for something that he wanted. The man's silent presence was all that he required, and for such a duty as that Dobbs was invaluable. He never dozed—he would have sat up all night without closing an eye—he never read, he never sneezed or coughed, or made his presence objectionable in any way; and he never spoke unless first

spoken to. Silent, watchful, and alert, he was always there and always the same.

Mr. St. George never slept without a light in his room, and Dobbs, who had a little sofa-bed in the dressing-room, and who was a remarkably light sleeper, was instructed to arouse his master at once should he hear the latter begin to toss about or moan in his sleep.

The eighth of February had come. Kester was beginning to think that it was about time his visit to Park Newton should be brought to a close. He had two horses in training at Chantilly, on which he based some brilliant expectations, and his heart and thoughts were in the stable with his pets. Every day that he prolonged his stay at Park Newton merely served to deepen his hatred of the place. "I shall have a fit of horrors if I stay here much longer," he said to himself. "I'll invent some important business, and try to get away the day after to-morrow. I must persuade the old boy to come and spend a month with me at Chantilly when the spring sets fairly in."

Dinner that day was quite an hour later than usual. General St. George had been to see an old friend who was ill, and he did not get back till late. Contrary to his usual practice, Richard Dering sat this evening with his uncle and cousin, after the cloth was removed: He sat drinking his wine in an absent mood, and scarcely joining in the conversation at all. By-and-by Pearce brought a note to the General on a salver. He put on his spectacles, opened the note, and read it. Then, with a little peevish exclamation, he tossed it into the fire.

“Another of them,” he said. “We shall be left before long without a servant to wait on us. I certainly did not anticipate this annoyance when I came to live at Park Newton.”

“What is the annoyance of which you speak?” asked Kester.

“Why, that fellow Finch has just given me notice that he intends to leave this day month. That will make the sixth of them, man or maid, that has left me since I came here ; and

I hear that the rest, old and new, are all likely to follow suit before long."

"You astonish me," said Kester. "You have always seemed to me the most indulgent of masters. If anything, too lenient—excuse me, sir, for saying so—and I can't understand at all why these idiots should want to leave you."

"Oh, it's not me they want to leave: it's the house that doesn't suit them."

"The house! And what have they to complain of as regards the house?"

"They swear, every man jack of them, that it's haunted."

Kester's pale face became a shade paler. He fingered his empty wine glass nervously and did not answer for a little while.

"Park Newton haunted! What ridiculous nonsense is this?" he said at last with a forced laugh. "I lived in the house for years when I was a lad; but I certainly never knew before that it had so peculiar a reputation."

"It is only of late—only since the murder

last May—that people have got into the way of saying these things.”

Again Kester was silent. Richard Dering’s keen glance was fixed on his face. He felt it rather than saw it. His under lip quivered slightly. He moved uneasily in his chair.

“What a parcel of blockheads these people must be!” he exclaimed at last. “Do we live in the nineteenth century, or have we gone back to the middle ages? If I were in your place, sir, I would send the whole lot packing, and have an entirely new set from London. It is only these superstitious country-bred louts who believe in such rubbish as ghosts: your thoroughbred Cockney has no faith in anything half so unsubstantial.”

“It is certainly very singular,” said the General, “that these idle fancies of weak brains should be so contagious. The first man who propagates the idea of a house being haunted has much to answer for. He never finds any lack of ready-made believers; and it is remarkable that we who know better, when we have a subject like this so persistently

forced on our notice, come at last, quite unconsciously to ourselves and with no desire whatever to do so, to give a sort of half credence to it. We listen with a more attentive ear to statements so obstinately made, and emanating from so many different sources."

"My dear uncle," cried Kester, "you are surely never going to allow yourself to be converted into a believer in this wretched nonsense!"

"My dear Kester, I am not aware that I have ever been accounted as a superstitious man, and I don't think that I am going to become one so late in the day. I merely say that there is about these matters a certain degree of contagion which it is next to impossible altogether to resist."

Richard, who up to this point had taken no part in the conversation, now spoke. "From what I can make out," he said, "there seems to be a strange coherence, a remarkable similarity, in the stories told by the different persons who profess to have seen these ap-

pearances. And now they are not content with saying that Park Newton is haunted by one ghost: they will have it that two of them have been seen of late."

"Two of them!" exclaimed the General and Kester in one breath.

"Ay, two of them," answered Richard. "One of them I need not name. The other one is said to be the ghost of my poor lost brother."

"What wretched fabrications are these!" exclaimed Kester. "Are you and I, sir," turning to the General, "to have our lives worried and our peace of mind broken by the babbling of a set of idiots, such as there unfortunately seems to be in this house?"

"They do not disturb my peace of mind, Kester."

"They do mine, sir. This house is my property—pardon me for mentioning the fact. Once let it acquire the unenviable reputation of being haunted, and for fifty years to come everybody will swear that it is so. Should

you, sir, ever choose to leave the house, what chance shall I have of getting another tenant? None! With the reputation of being haunted, no one will live in it. Slowly but surely it will go to rack and ruin."

"It is hardly to be wondered at," said the General, "that these people have connected a tragedy so terrible, as that which will make Park Newton memorable for a century to come, with certain ghostly appearances. I myself find my thoughts dwelling upon the same thing very frequently indeed. What a strange, sad fate was that of poor young Osmond! Him I did not know. But in my dreams I am continually seeing the face of my poor lost boy whose fate was only one degree less sad. Do you never find yourself haunted in the same way, Kester?"

"Haunted, Uncle Lionel? That is a strange word to make use of. I have not forgotten my cousin, of course—nor am I likely ever to do so."

For a little while they all sat in silence. Nothing was heard save the crackling of the

fire, or the dropping of a cinder ; or, now and then, the moaning of the wintry wind as it crept about the old house, trying the doors and windows, and seeming as though it were burdened with the weight of some terrible secret which it was striving to tell but could not.

Suddenly Richard Dering spoke. "This is the eighth of February," he said. "Nine months ago to-night, Percy Osmond was murdered, and under this very roof. To-night, at twelve o'clock, if what these people allege be true, footsteps will be heard—the noise of some one walking up and down the room where the murder was committed. Such being the case, what more easy than to prove or disprove the accuracy of at least this part of the story ? Why not go, all three of us, a few minutes before twelve ; and, accompanied by two or three of the servants who shall be chosen by the rest as a deputation, station ourselves close to the door of the nailed-up room, and there await the result ? I do not for one moment anticipate that we

shall either see or hear anything out of the ordinary way. Once let us prove this to the satisfaction of the servants, and I don't think that we shall be troubled with much more nonsense about ghostly footsteps or appearances at Park Newton."

"Not a bad idea, Dick, by any means," said the General. "What say you, Kester?"

Kester had pushed back his chair from the table while Richard was speaking. There was a strange look on his face: in his eyes terror, on his lips a derisive smile. He emptied his glass before answering.

"Faith, sir," he said, "it seems to me that you attach far too much importance to the cackling of these idiots. I would treat their assertions with the contempt they deserve, and send the whole crew about their business before they were two days older. Your presence there, as it seems to me, would be like a confession of your belief in the possible truth of certain statements which are really so childish that no sensible person can treat

them otherwise than with the most supreme contempt."

"I hardly agree with you there, Kester," said General St. George. "Our presence would be like a guarantee of good faith, and would set the question at rest at once and for ever. At all events, the plan is one which I mean to try, and I should like both of you to be there with me. Richard, you can arrange for certain of the servants to be ready a few minutes before midnight."

"Really, sir, I should feel obliged if you would excuse me from accompanying you," said Kester. "I have a bad headache to-night, and intend to get between the sheets as soon as possible."

"Pooh—pooh—pooh!" said the General, hastily. "I shall not excuse you. Hang your headaches! When I was a young fellow we left headaches to the women, and did not know what such things were ourselves. I have set my mind on having a game of backgammon with you this evening, and I shall not let you go."

His uncle's tone was so peremptory that Kester dared not say another word. He sat down again in silence.

At five minutes before twelve, they all met in the library—General St. George, Richard, Kester, and a deputation from the servants' hall, headed by Finch with a pair of lighted candles. Finch led the way through the cold and dismal passages, up the black oaken staircase, through the dreary picture gallery, where the portrait of each dead and gone St. George looked down inquiringly, and seemed to ask the meaning of so strange a procession; and so at last they reached the door of the nailed-up room. Finch deposited his candles on the nearest window-sill, and by their dim, uncertain light, the company grouped themselves round the door, the servants a little way behind their superiors, and waited. No one spoke: no one wanted to speak. They were thinking of the dark tragedy that, but a few short months before, and in the dead of night, had been enacted behind that shut-up door. Presently the turret-clock began to

strike. Slowly and lingeringly it tolled, as if unwilling to let the dying day drop into its grave. Over all there, a deeper hush fell. Twelve solemn strokes, and then silence and another day.

Silence for, perhaps, the space of half a minute; when, with an indescribable awe, they heard, one and all, a slight noise, as of a chair being pushed back; and next moment came the sound, clear, distinct, and unmistakable, of footsteps slowly pacing the bare, polished floor of the nailed-up room. The servants all shrank back a little, and turned their white and frightened faces on one another. Kester St. George, too, staggered back a step or two, and leaned for support against an angle of the wall.


Even at that supreme moment he could feel that the cold, stern eyes of Richard Dering were fixed on his face, and he hated him with a hatred like death.

Hardly breathing, they all listened, while the footsteps slowly, unhesitatingly, paced the room. Suddenly they heard another sound

which several there present at once recognized. What they heard was the noise of a man coughing ; and the cough they heard was the short, dry, grating cough that had been peculiar to Mr. Percy Osmond, and to him alone. Finch recognized it in a moment. So did Kester St. George ; who, with a quick cry of pain, pressed his hand to his heart, and staggering back a pace or two, fell to the ground in a dead faint.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SQUIRE'S TRIBULATION.

HAT more thankless office is there than to be the bearer of ill news to those we love or regard? Not often in the course of his life had such a duty fallen to the lot of Tom Bristow, and never had the burden seemed so heavy as on this present occasion. He would gladly have given a very fair share of all that he was worth could he but have turned his ill news into good news, or else have imposed upon some one else the telling of those evil tidings of which he was the bearer. From London he had sent a carefully-worded telegram to the Squire, which the latter would know how to interpret, hoping

thereby to break in some measure the force of the blow which nothing could much longer avert.

When, on his return to Pincote, Tom was ushered into the Squire's room, he found the old man, to all appearance, very much better in health than when he had left him. Mental anxiety had gone a long way towards curing, for the time being, the physical ills from which he had been suffering. He held out his hand, and gave a long, searching look into Tom's face.

"All gone?" he whispered.

"Yes—all gone," answered Tom.

He gripped Tom's hand very hard. "I did not think it was quite so bad as that," he said. "Not quite. My poor Jenny! My poor little girl! What is to become of her after I'm gone? And Bird, too! The confidence I had in that villain!" He sighed deeply, dropped Tom's hand, and shut his eyes for a few moments, as if in pain.

"You will stay to dinner," he said, presently.

"If you will excuse me to-day——" began Tom.

"But I won't excuse you, sir. Why on earth should I?" he answered, with a flash of his old irritability. "The old house is not good enough for you, I suppose, now you know it holds nothing but paupers."

"Thank you, sir: I will stay to dinner," said Tom, quietly.

"It will be a charity to Jenny, too," added the Squire. "She's been moped up indoors, without a soul to speak to, for I don't know how long. And it's more than a month since she heard from young Cope—his letters must have miscarried, you know—and I'm afraid that's preying on her mind; and so you had better keep her company to-day."

Tom needed no further pressing, we may be sure. He smiled grimly to himself at the idea of Edward Cope's long silence being a matter of distress to Jane. He rose to go.

"Just ring that bell, will you?" said the Squire. "And sit down again for another minute or two. There's something I wanted

to say to you, but I can't call to mind what it is just now."

Jane answered the bell in person. She gave Tom her hand in silence, but there was a world of meaning in her eyes as she did so.

"My dear, I wish you would see whether Ridley is anywhere about, and send word that I want to see him. What do you think the villain has done?"

"I don't know, I'm sure, papa."

"Why, he's planted a lot of white hyacinths along with the purple ones in your poor mother's favourite bed opposite the dressing-room window, when he knows very well that I never have any but purple ones there. She never had any but purple ones, and I never will. The scoundrel deserves to be well horsewhipped. I'll discharge him on the spot! I swear I will!"

"I will tell him to come and see you," said Jane, calmly. She knew of old that her father's bark was worse than his bite, and that he had no more real intention of

discharging Ridley than he had of flying to the moon.

“And now, if you will just give orders to have the basket-carriage brought round, I shall be glad, dear. I feel wonderfully better to-day, and I think a drive would do me good.”

“But would Dr. Davidson approve of your going out to-day, papa?”

“Hang Dr. Davidson! I’m not his slave, am I? I tell you that I feel very much better; and, to get out, if only for half an hour, will make me better still.”

“Then you will let me go with you?” said Jane.

“Nothing of the kind. I’ve a great deal to think about while I’m out, and I want to be alone. Besides, I’ve asked Bristow to stay to dinner, and you must do your best to entertain him.”

“If you go out, papa, I shall go with you,” said Jane, in her straightforward, positive way. “Besides which, Briggs is ill to-day, and there’s nobody to drive you—unless you will let Mr.

Bristow be your coachman for once, and then we shall all be together."

With some difficulty the Squire was induced to consent to this arrangement. It was evident that he would have preferred to go out alone, but that was just what Jane would by no means allow him to do. Her woman's instinct told her that they were in the midst of a thunder-cloud, but where and when the lightning would strike she could not even guess. In any case, it seemed to her well that for some time to come her father should be left alone as little as possible.

So they drove out together, all three of them. The Squire was unusually silent, but did not otherwise seem different from his ordinary mood, and neither Tom nor Jane was much inclined for talking. On the road they found a child of six, a little girl who had wandered away from home and lost herself, who was sitting by the roadside crying bitterly. The Squire would have the child on his knee, although she was neither very neatly dressed nor very pretty. He kissed her, and soothed

away her tears, and made her laugh, and found out where she lived. Then, in a little while, still sitting on his knee, she fell asleep, and the old man wrapped the thickest rug around her, and sheltered her from the cold as tenderly as though she had been his own child. And when the girl's mother was found, and the girl herself had to be given up, he made her kiss him, and put half-a-crown into her hand, and promised to call and see her in a day or two. Tom, watching him narrowly all the time, said to himself, "I don't understand him at all to-day. I thought my news would have overwhelmed him, but it seems to have had far less effect upon him than it had upon me. I'm fairly puzzled." But there are some troubles so overwhelming that, for a time at least, they numb and deaden the feelings by their very intensity. All the more painful is the after-waking.

"I think, dear, that I will go and lie down for a little while," said the Squire, when they had reached home. "You will wake me up in time for dinner."

But there was Blenkinsop, his steward, waiting by appointment, who wanted his signature to the renewal of a lease.

"Yes, yes, to be sure, Blenkinsop," said the Squire, in his old business-like way, as he sat down at his writing-table and spread out the paper before him and dipped his pen in the ink. Then he paused.

"Just your name, sir, nothing more—on that line," said the steward, deferentially, marking the place with his finger.

"Just so, Blenkinsop, just so," said the Squire, tremulously. "But what is my name? Just for the moment I don't seem as if I could recollect it."

A look of horror flashed from Jane's eyes into the eyes of Tom. She was by her father's side in a moment. He looked helplessly up at her, and tried to smile, but his lips quivered and tears stood in his eyes.

"What is it, dear?" she said, as she stooped and pressed her lips to his forehead.

"I want to sign this lease, and for the life of me I can't recollect my own name."

"Titus Culpepper, dear," she whispered in his ear.

"Of course. What an idiot I must be!" he exclaimed with a laugh, as he dashed off the name in his usual rapid style, and ended with a bigger flourish than usual.

"Won't you go to bed, papa?" said Jane, insinuatingly, as soon as Blenkinsop was gone. "You will rest so much better there, you know."

"Go to bed at this time of day, indeed! What are you thinking about? No, I'll just have a little snooze on the sofa—nothing more. And be sure you wake me up in time for dinner."

In less than two minutes he had gone off to sleep, as calmly and quietly as any little child. Jane rejoined Tom in the drawing-room.

"I am afraid that papa has heard some very bad news, Mr. Bristow," she said.

"Yes, and I was the unfortunate bearer of it," answered Tom.

"He sent you to London the other day

to make certain private inquiries for him?"

"He did."

"And the ill news you brought this morning is the result of those inquiries?"

"It is."

There was a pause, which Tom was the first to break. "I think it only right, Miss Culpepper," he said, "that you should be made acquainted with the nature of the business which took me to London. You have no brother, and I know that you have had the practical management of many of your father's affairs for a long time. It is only right that you should know."

"But I would rather not know, Mr. Bristol, if you think that papa would prefer, in the slightest degree, that I should not be told."

"I think it highly desirable that you should be told," said Tom. "No doubt Mr. Culpepper himself will tell you everything before long."

"I am not so sure on that point," interrupted

Jane. "As regards his pecuniary affairs, I know little or nothing, although I have long had my suspicions that there was something wrong somewhere."

"In such a matter as this there should be nothing hidden from you—at least not now; and I will take on myself the responsibility of telling you all that I know. Should Mr. Culpepper himself tell you subsequently, there will be no harm done, while you will have had time to think the affair over, and will be better able to advise him as to what ought to be done under the circumstances. Should he not choose to tell you, I still maintain that it will be better, both for himself and for you, that you should rest in ignorance no longer."

Tom then told her all about his visit to London, its object, and its result.

"Thank heaven that it's nothing more serious than the loss of a few thousand pounds!" said Jane, with an air of relief, when Tom had done. "Papa will soon get over that, and we shall be as happy again as ever we have been."

"I am by no means certain that Mr. Culpep-

per will get over it as easily as you imagine," said Tom, gravely. "I suspect that the entire savings of many years have gone in this crash; and that alone, to a man of your father's time of life, is something very serious indeed."

"Don't think, Mr. Bristow, that I want to make too light of the loss," said Jane, earnestly. "Still, after all, it is nothing but money."

Her spirits had risen wonderfully during the last few minutes, and she could not help showing it. "Dinner will be ready in half an hour," she added. "I will go and see whether papa is awake."

Presently she came back. "He is still fast asleep," she said.

"I think I would not disturb him if I were you," said Tom. "Sleep, just now, is his best medicine."

As the Squire still slept on, they dined alone, and alone they spent the evening together. They talked of a thousand things, and they seemed to have a thousand more to talk about when the time for parting had come. This evening Tom seemed to care no longer

about hiding his feelings. He sat nearer to Jane, he bent more closely over her at the piano; once or twice his lips seemed to touch her hair lightly, but she was not quite sure on the point, and consequently did not care to reprove him. His eyes sought hers more persistently and boldly than they had ever done before, and beneath those ardent glances her own eyes fell, troubled and confused.

When it was time to go, Jane went with him to the door. Said Tom, as he stood on the threshold, hat in hand, "Should Mr. Culpepper speak to you about what I have told you this evening, and should he seem at all troubled in his mind about it, will you kindly suggest that he should send for me? It may seem rather conceited on my part to ask you to do this, but as your father has honoured me by taking me into his confidence so far, there can be no harm in my expressing a hope that he will do so still further. It may be in my power to help him through his difficulties or, at least, through part of them."

"You are very kind," said Jane, with tears

in her eyes, as she pressed his hand, gratefully.

“And now—good-night,” said Tom.

Still holding her hand, he looked earnestly into her face. They were standing together just under the hall lamp, and every shade of expression was plainly visible. Her eyes met his for a moment. He read something there—I know not what—that emboldened him. His arm stole round her waist. He pressed her unresisting form to his heart. His lips touched hers for one brief instant. It was the first kiss of love. “Good-night, my darling,” he whispered; and almost before Jane knew what had befallen her, he was gone.

Her father being still asleep, Jane, all in a sweet confusion, took her work upstairs, and sat down by the dressing-room fire to wait till he should awake. But he still slept on, and by-and-by it grew late, so she sent the servants to bed, and made up her mind to sit by his side till morning. Just then nothing could have been more grateful to her. No thought of sleep would be possible to her for hours to

come. She wanted to think over the events of that wonderful evening—to think over them in silence and alone. The time to analyze her feelings had not yet come: she did not care to make the attempt: she only wanted to realize quietly to herself the one sweet blissful fact, that she was loved, and by the one person in the whole world to whom her own love could be given in return. What happy thoughts nestled round her young heart in the midnight quietude of the old house! “He loves me!” she whispered to herself. But the night wind, listening at the window, caught the syllables and whispered them back, and then rushed gleefully away to tell the trees and the flowers, that began already to feel the warmth of spring in their veins, and the little birds sleeping cosily in their nests beneath the winter moon, and Jane’s secret was a secret no longer.

It was nearly three o’clock when the Squire woke up from his long sleep. It was a minute or two before he could collect his thoughts, and call to mind all that had happened.

“You are no better than a little simpleton for sitting up,” he said, gruffly. “As if I couldn’t take care of myself when I awoke!” Then he drew her on to his knee and kissed her tenderly. “Get me some bread and cheese and ale,” he said. “I’ll have supper and breakfast in one.”

“Won’t you have something different from bread and cheese, papa?” she asked. “There is some game pie and——”

“No, nothing but bread and cheese,” he said, gloomily. “That seems about the only thing I shall be able to afford in time to come.”

So Jane went down into the lower part of the house, and brought up some bread and cheese and ale; but she brought some game pie also, and when she put a plateful of the latter article before her father, he ate it without a word, and without seeming to know what it was he was eating. He did not speak another word till he had done.

“Jenny, you are a clever girl,” he said abruptly, at last, “but do you think you

are clever enough to earn your own living?"

Jane laughed. "Your question is rather a strange one," she said. "I will answer it as a woman answers most questions—by asking another. Why do you ask me?"

"Because if I were to die to-morrow, or next month, or next year, that is certainly what you would have to do."

"And I don't doubt my ability to do it," said Jane, with spirit. "Only, papa, you are not going to die either next month, or next year, so that the subject is one which we need not discuss further."

"But it is a subject that must be discussed, and discussed very fully, too. Jane, my girl, you are a pauper, neither more nor less than a pauper!" He spoke in a dry harsh voice, as if he had made up his mind that his emotion should on no account over-master him.

"Well, papa dear, even if such be the case, I don't suppose that either you or I will love each other any the less on that account."

"That is not the question, girl. It was

always a happiness to me to know that I should be able to give you fifteen or twenty thousand on your wedding day. In trying to turn that fifteen into fifty thousand, I have lost every penny of it, and in so doing I have altogether ruined your prospects in life."

"I can't see that at all, papa. What you did you did for the best, and if I ever do get married, I hope to marry some one who will love me for myself, and not for any money I might be possessed of."

"Very pretty, and very sentimental," said the Squire, gruffly, "but confounded rubbish for all that. And how hard on young Cope! He will be quite justified in breaking off the engagement."

"What a splendid opportunity Mr. Cope will now have for proving the sincerity of his affection!" said Jane, with a little contemptuous curl of the lip.

"You are talking rank nonsense, Janet. Edward Cope loves you; there's no doubt of that; but his father will never consent to his

marrying a beggar, which is just about what you are at the present moment; and Edward has been too well brought up to go in opposition to his father. I confess it will be a great disappointment to me."

"But none to me, papa dear!" cried Jane, impulsively, as she flung her arms round her father's neck and kissed him—"no disappointment to me! Rather let us call it a happy release."

"I don't understand you," said the old man, as he took her by the shoulders and gazed into her face. "I thought you loved Edward Cope as much as he loved you. You don't mean to tell me that I have been mistaken."

"There has been a mistake somewhere, papa," faltered Jane, as she drew one of his arms round her neck, and nestled her head on his shoulder. "I—I almost fancy that it must have been on my side. I allowed myself to drift into an engagement with Mr. Cope almost without knowing what I was about. I liked Mr. Cope very well, and I thought

that I could be happy as his wife, but I have found out my mistake since then. For me to marry Mr. Cope would be to condemn myself to a life of hopeless misery. I could never love him, papa, as a wife ought to love her husband."

"Tut—tut—tut, girl! What romantic rubbish have you got into your head? Cope's a nice young fellow, and when you were his wife you would soon learn to love him well enough, I warrant. All I'm afraid of is that he won't have you for a wife—and all through my fault—all through my fault!"

Jane saw that the present was no time to say more on the point, and wisely held her tongue. For a little while the silence between them was unbroken.

"But I haven't told you the worst yet, Jenny," he said at last.

"Oh! papa."

"Five thousand pounds of your Aunt Fanny's money has been lost in the crash. She had entrusted me with the money to do the best I could for her, and that's the result.

She will be at Pincote in less than a week from now, and the first thing she will do, after she has taken off her bonnet and changed her boots, will be to ask me for her money. She will ask me for her money, and what am I to say to her?"

"Good gracious, papa! Aunt Fanny is your own sister, and surely she, of all people in the world, would be the last to trouble you for her money."

"She would be the first," said the Squire, fiercely. "I'd sooner, far sooner, be indebted to the veriest stranger than to her. You don't know your aunt as I know her. I should never hear the last of it. I should have no peace of my life. Day and night my turpitude—my vile criminality, as she would call it—would be dinned into my ears, till I should be driven [half crazy. And not only that: your Aunt Fanny is a woman who can never keep a secret. To one confidential friend after another the whole affair would be whispered, with sundry embellishments of her own, till at last the whole country side

would know of it, and I could never hold up my head in society again."

"As I understand the case, papa, you want to raise five thousand pounds within the next few days?"

"That is precisely what I want."

"Then why not ask Mr. Cope? Surely he would not refuse to lend it to you."

"I am not so sure about that," said Mr. Culpepper, dryly. "Cope has not been like the same man to me of late that he used to be. The old ship is beginning to leak, and the rats are deserting it. I suppose I shall be compelled to ask him, but I would almost sooner lose my right hand than do it."

"There's Mr. Bristow," suggested Jane, timidly. "Why not speak to him? He might, perhaps, find some means of helping you out of your difficulty."

"How can a man that's not worth five thousand pence be of any use to a man who wants five thousand pounds?" asked the Squire, contemptuously. "No, no; Bristow's all very well in his way. A decent, good-

natured young fellow, with all his wits about him, but of no use whatever at a crisis like the present."

"Is there not such a thing as a mortgage?" asked Jane. "Could you not raise some money on the estate?"

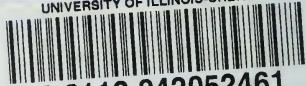
"When my father lay on his deathbed," said the Squire, gravely, "he made me take a solemn oath that I would never raise a penny by mortgage on the estate, and I would rather suffer anything and everything than break that promise. But it's high time we were both in bed. You look worn-out for want of sleep, and I don't feel over bright myself. Kiss me, dearie, and let us say good-night, or rather good-morning. We must hope for the best, and at present that seems the only thing we can do."

The following post brought a letter from Mrs. McDermott. After mentioning on what day and by what train she might be expected to arrive, she wrote: "You won't forget the five thousand pounds, brother. I have bought some house property, and want to

remit the money immediately on my arrival. I suppose it would not be reasonable to expect more than five per cent. interest on the amount?" The Squire tossed the letter across the table to Jane without a word.

END OF VOL. II.

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